fbi: don't move

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fbi: don't move

by RebelsAdvocate

Summary

Ivan is a completely ordinary, totally unassuming, simple meme-loving guy, and Alfred is the FBI agent who secretly lives in his camera. Governments and grudges are thrown aside as chance encounters in Washington D.C. bring them closer and closer together.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

fbi: don't move

Ivan laughed, which was to say he snorted very, *very* lightly. Even *snorting* was an overstatement; a silent wisp of breath escaped him as he swiped away at his screen, liking the photo and commenting: LOLOKOLKOLOLOL1!1! He switched gears to search up the hashtag under the meme, something he almost never did, and found a semi-sorted collection of posts following the same theme. He wasted no time screenshotting a few of his favorites to pirate for himself later.

Soon. Soon he would break 999K followers. And then, and *then.* Then he would have a million followers. A million was a lot, depending on who you asked. Beyoncé only had fifteen million—at least on Twitter. (On Instagram she had eleven hundred million.) He wanted to rule the Internet.

Ivan turned his phone off and threw it across the bed, forcing himself to get up and move if he wanted to retrieve it. Stretching languidly, he rolled out of the warmth of the covers and faced the day.

He dressed in comfortable, durable clothes; Ivan had recently secured a position as a horticulturist for the Smithsonian Gardens along the National Mall, which was a fancy way of saying he cut grass and trimmed hedges all day, except it was really nice grass and they were really nice hedges. Obviously, wearing his favorite scarf was less than ideal for the sweaty work, but Ivan would never and *could* never take it off. He slipped into his boots and thrust a spare pair of gloves into his pocket. Sadly, he couldn't use his phone on the job, but he *could* use headphones. He began to hum to himself, imagining the songs he would listen to on his first shift.

Before shoving his phone into his bag, Ivan took a glance at the blank screen. A strange feeling overcame him as his eyes drifted upwards, making contact with the minuscule blue dots of light inside his camera lens. He held its gaze for a brief, piqued interest that lasted about two seconds, then giggled. "Goodbye, Mr. FBI," he sang to himself.

It was silly. He dropped the phone into his bag and left his apartment with haste.

Alfred grabbed street food on the way to work, washing it down with a hefty Starbucks to go. Whipping the shades off from overtop his regular glasses, he strode into headquarters. Immediately, he had to give up his meal so it could be scanned for toxins while he himself was stripped and searched. Elizabeta Hédervári, chief of the gray division, took an eternity to scrutinize Alfred's badge. Alfred tapped his toes and fidgeted to himself. Predictably, Ivan would be online in seven minutes. "Alright, Jones." She handed back Alfred's ID. "You're

clear. But don't let me catch you in here again, or it's straight to the slammer." She drew a line across her throat.

Alfred gratefully collected his food and his badge. "Wait, what the? Dude, I *work* here!"

She stared him down.

Alfred, without hesitation, steadied himself and stared back.

After a few seconds of silence, Chief Héderváry burst into hearty laughter. "I'm only testing you, kid! I guess it's very Gilbert of me. But gosh, you would have thought I had just admitted to you that the tooth fairy isn't real, or that Santa is Illuminati propaganda, or that JFK is still alive up on a secret moon base in space...*oops*." She covered her mouth. "I've said too much."

Alfred blinked slowly. "Okay. I'll just...get to work then, um, before you zap me and wipe my memory."

The agent nodded. "Better bolt. Gotta keep you on your feet." She then began drawing her stun gun, but Alfred had already disappeared down the hall. He frantically dove into an arriving elevator and jammed a finger down on the button to close the doors as the clunky boots of the Héderváry's footsteps came closer. Alfred hugged his food to his chest and pressed into the corner of the tiny metal box. He had had his memory wiped before, he was *certain*, and had even had to do it to others once or twice—it was a ghastly, abominable experience. The chief's image appeared between the elevator's two closing doors and Alfred screamed, but when the shot was fired the elevator had already begun its descent.

Alfred shivered, cradling himself. He was safe for now. He dug into his food and snuck out a bite of greasy fry. It would be two hundred more dings of the elevator before he arrived at the secret underground black zone where all the FBI agents monitored their respecting, (un)suspecting citizens.

Alfred had finished half of his coffee before he made it to the negative two hundredth floor. It was pretty swampy down there, due to the thick consistency of cubicles, the heat coming off of so much compressed technology, and also due to the government having concealed the fact that, yes, Washington D.C. had really been built atop a swamp. He had his semi-greasy fingerprints scanned a second time and then navigated the maze toward his cubicle. He only had two minutes at best before Ivan came home.

Ivan was Alfred's monitor man, Alfred's subject of spy. Alfred had Ivan's schedule practically burned into his brain: he woke up at six-thirty, dabbled on his phone for fifteen minutes, then put it in his pocket and didn't use it again until four, when he got off work. Ivan did not have a computer, making Alfred's hacking tasks both easier and harder by reserving everything to Ivan's cell phone. Alfred would transfer Ivan's morning visuals to Alfred's own laptop to monitor in the morning, and Alfred usually came to headquarters to watch Ivan during the rest of his day. Sometimes he took shifts with another agent, but lately Alfred had been finding himself at headquarters more and more. After all, it was important to develop a deep understanding of your subject, even if your subject had no idea you even existed.

Alfred fired up his special, government-issued laptop, opening the monitor. Just in time, too; Ivan's face soon filled the screen. Alfred sighed. It was on.

Alfred knew almost everything about Ivan. His names (Ivan "Vanya" Braginsky), his family (one older sister and one younger sister), and even the songs he sang in the shower (surprisingly a lot of Taylor Swift). Alfred knew Ivan was the head of a semi-famous online meme domain. Alfred knew Ivan watered the sunflowers in his window every day as soon as he came home. Alfred knew Ivan didn't have many friends. Alfred knew Ivan had long, red scars circling around his neck, hidden under that huge off-white scarf he always wore. Alfred knew Ivan liked soft things and had five blankets on his bed. Alfred also knew that Ivan was at the top of the FBI's list of suspected dangerous Russian intelligence agents, and it was Alfred's duty to report any fishy activity. So far, Alfred had observed none.

Other than the fact that Alfred had to be constantly alert in his job, monitoring Ivan was pretty easy. Ivan had a cute face, and often made little childish noises and expressions whenever he saw something that grabbed his attention. Alfred had trained in the Russian language for years and still couldn't capture the melodiousness of Ivan's murmurs to himself. Sometimes Ivan would be scrolling through social media at night and fall asleep on his phone, which was annoying but undeniably adorable. And he was an immigrant; Alfred could damn well appreciate the hard work it must have taken Ivan to leave his homeland and adjust to life here.

However, this morning, Ivan had addressed Alfred personally, saying "Goodbye, Mr. FBI" before he put his phone away, and that had been hella creepy.

Ivan wasn't saying anything now, just staring at the screen, his eyelids half-shut, eyes moving in line formation over whatever he was reading. Alfred took a sip of his Starbucks and tapped into Ivan's phone display, bringing up a rectangle of white with a thick block of Helvetica text. Alfred's eyes scanned it himself, knowing it was another online post, and Alfred had read thousands of Ivan's. They were quality. When he finished laughing, he switched focus back to Ivan's camera visual; the ceiling behind Ivan was moving as Ivan sat down at his kitchen table. Ivan picked at his lip, snorting a little. The sound of his bags hitting the floor echoed to Alfred, and soon Ivan began humming a sweet song.

Alfred kicked back in his ultra-comfort wheely chair and popped in another fry, enjoying the music. He had no reason to feel so comfortable in the artificial presence of a creepy Russian, yet his wariness was drowned out by tribute for the memes. And Ivan's face. Thank god Ivan at least had a nice face that Alfred got to stare at *all evening*.

There was a knock on the wall of Alfred's cubicle. He spun around too quickly in the wheely chair and had to overcorrect, graciously spilling a couple of fries into his lap. "Whaddya want?"

It was Toris. A fellow FBI monitor, the long-haired Lithuanian stood stiff in the doorway to Alfred's workspace, making more eye contact with Alfred's inspirational NASA star map poster than with Alfred. "Hi. Um, Felicks went to the bathroom, so I was going to be taking break, and if I remember correctly, you told me to 'mosey on over when you get a chance, because I got the goods?'"

"Aw yeah!" Alfred pushed down his laptop screen so it was at a forty-five degree angle. Toris knew who Ivan was, and sometimes covered Alfred's shifts when Alfred stayed up too late playing video games or reading Marvel fanfiction, but Alfred still didn't want to be interrupted on the job. After all, both Ivan's screen and his camera were blank and black; he must have gone to take his daily shower. "Right here, man. Check it out. They were handin' them out all down the Mall, and I managed to snag a few extras!"

Toris took the item in his hand and inspected it cautiously. "This is a…a SAVE THE WHALES sticker?"

"No, a SAVE THE WHALES *magnet!*" Alfred corrected, spinning it over. "I thought you might want one, since your space is so plain and boring and all. It'd give you something to look at other than Felicks's fancy skirt collection, or whatever."

The tips of Toris's ears turned red. "They're designer." Yet he didn't refuse the magnet.

Not every FBI monitor happened to be stationed in the vicinity of their subject; Felicks lived halfway across the world from Toris, and was an alleged underground market weapons dealer, with emphasis on *alleged*. Mostly he just took selfies in the bathtub and embarrassed Toris to no end. Alfred considered himself lucky that Ivan was only half a city away, though they had yet to cross paths in public.

Toris drifted out with the magnet in hand and Alfred was left to finish dinner in peace. He flipped his screen back up and found that Ivan was at the stove, cooking his own meal while watching a Vine compilation. Alfred grinned, keeping up both the front camera and screen views as he dug in so he could laugh along with Ivan. "*I smell like beef."* A long time passed. They finished eating their dinners at the same time; Alfred imagined the noodle casserole thing Ivan had cooked tasted better than Alfred's weak Starbucks.

Now Ivan had set his phone against the wall to rest while he washed the dishes. He was mumbling peacefully to himself again, but Alfred couldn't tell if he was singing or talking over the sound of swishing water and clinking silverware. After a couple more plates, Ivan's movements slowed, and his gaze slowly climbed back up to the phone screen. The phone *camera.* "Are you there, Mr. FBI?" he whispered.

Alfred jolted in his seat. It was just like this morning! No warning, no nothing. In English! There was no way Ivan could ever *know*, of course, that he was being monitored, so the sudden unprompted conversations with a seemingly inanimate object had to stem from Ivan's latest meme obsession. Alfred knew about it.

He was onto them.

"How was your day?" Ivan asked, redirecting his gaze towards the skillet he was scrubbing. "Mine was well. I planted flowers today, and I had a nice conversation with a policeman. Do you talk to police often, Mr. FBI?"

Alfred let his shoulders relax, his mind wandering unintentionally, following Ivan's statements. Coincidentally, his brother Matthew was a DC police officer and friend of the

division, but sadly, they didn't have many chances to talk. "What are you doing, man?" Alfred blurted out. "You know this is weird, right?"

Alas, Ivan would never be able to hear Alfred. He had already begun saying something else by the time Alfred was done speaking: "...and work around the people, because it is so fun inside, and there's AC! People are scared to talk to me when I am working outside. But at least I don't have to stand all day." Ivan's voice had gotten quieter, forcing Alfred to pay closer attention. "Do you stand all day when you work, Mr. FBI?"

"Hell no." Alfred kicked the wheels of his chair. "But don't get excited—it's a curse, dude. I would choose a nice garden with fresh air over this stuffy old garage any day."

Ivan was silent and complacent, as if he was really listening, Dora the Explorer-like, and Alfred still couldn't discern if it was endearing or eerie. Ivan's eyelids were halfway shut, a tiny smile gracing his lips. He waited a second more, then nodded. "Is your work boring, Mr. FBI?"

He considered. "Yeah. Not that *you're* that boring, but…" Alfred let the sentence hang. It wasn't as if it mattered if he finished it, anyway. And the fact was that Ivan *was* pretty boring. He was the only one ever in his apartment, and went to bed early on Friday nights. On Saturdays he did laundry and cleaned, and every Sunday he napped and called his sisters! "I'm just glad you work so much so I don't have to. Wow, I did *not* mean for that to sound mean. Um, it's true, though. If you had a computer, things would be differen—"

"Agent Jones?" a recognizable accented voice peeped around the doorway. "Whom are you talking to?"

For the second time that day, Alfred jumped and pushed down his screen, muting Ivan. "No one, good golly, don't scare me like that!"

Chief Arthur Kirkland, Alfred's boss and the head of the black division, didn't appear to notice or care. He stood stiffer than Toris had, clipboard and pencil in hand. "Okay, so, listen. You're mates with Agent Beilschmidt, right? He never checked in with Chief Héderváry and she wanted me to ask—"

Alfred adjusted his glasses, scrunching up his nose. "Which Beilschmidt?"

"The elder." Arthur steeled himself, putting a perplexed finger to his temple. "Apparently, Gilbert's gone MIA."

Alfred crossed his arms. "I haven't seen him since office bowling on Friday. He got his arm stuck in the ball return. Today Héderváry tried to stun me when I checked in! What is *up* with the gray division?"

Kirkland shook his head to himself, beginning to pace in place. His eyes were as wide as quarters, staring unforgivably at his clipboard as if it held all the answers. "With Carriedo missing already, I'm sure there's foul play to suspect, or even worse—the Mafia. They're on the same team; it's too much of a coincidence. It also means—" He gasped suddenly, raising

his crazy blond head in epiphany. Then his voice lowered to a whisper. "It means someone else will be next."

Alfred sat up straighter, suddenly excited. "Whoa, really? Can I help? What case were they working on before they disappeared? Who saw them last? Where—"

"No." Arthur Kirkland was cross. "Not your division. Just let them handle it. Who are you monitoring, again?"

He hesitated. "Ivan. I mean, Braginsky. The...the guy—"

"The Russian spy, right." Arthur stuck his pen behind his ear. "Well. I'll be off, then. Remember to record any—"

"I know, I *know*." Alfred waved his hand. He felt more and more antsy the longer the Chief was in his space. "Just get on with it. It's *fine*."

"Right." Arthur frowned and touched his headpiece, half-turned away. "Good day, then. Do your work."

Alfred swiveled back to Ivan, groaning loudly as Arthur departed. Sometimes he felt like he was never taken seriously, but then again, he did sit at a desk and watch a famous memer's life all day. He wasn't sure if such a job should be taken seriously or not.

"I *wish* I was in a different division," Alfred blurted out. While he had been distracted by Arthur, Ivan had finished washing dishes and was now wiping down his stove and countertops. "I want to do more field agent stuff. My job would be a lot less boring if, instead of hacking all your gadgets and watching you from behind this screen, I could *actually* go out and spy on you. You know, like, shadow you from around street corners, hiding in the bushes with binoculars, open up the refrigerator door and *BAM* I'm there!" Alfred slapped his hands on his knees, grinning. "Eat all your food. Make you drop your croissant."

Ivan was still smiling to himself in that charming, unnerving way as he strangled the last drops of water from his rag and hung it over the faucet to dry. "What do you like to do when you're not working, Mr. FBI? Or do you work all the time? I imagine you taking shifts with someone else. Which FBI do I speak to now?"

"Nope, just me. I mean, other black division monitors like Toris sometimes, or Ludwig Beilschmidt if I can convince him, but mostly just me. They all have other guys to watch; y'all suspected criminals are weird. If I wasn't here I would be at NASA." Alfred glanced wistfully at the star chart above his head. "But *they* wanted me to work on computers, and *I* wanted to go to space. Diddly darn dang, I love space."

Ivan waited five more seconds before responding. "That's nice."

Alfred nodded fervently. "Damn right it is. Arthur—*what a mom*—says I waste my talents—"

"I hope you are having an good day, wherever you are," Ivan mused. "I assume you work at FBI headquarters. I walked by that place today. Tomorrow I work in the butterfly garden. It is

very close, and my favorite place to work."

"That's rad. I've been there. It's right next to the Museum of Natural—"

"It is next to the Museum of Natural History." Ivan was staring directly at the camera. For the many months Alfred had been Ivan's monitor, he hadn't noticed the purple hue his eyes took on in this dim kitchen glow. "Very beautiful, *da*? Convenient that most of the Smithsonian buildings are close to each other, all in the same place. I can look at prize artifacts and arrange flowers at the same time."

Alfred was silent. A vision of Ivan with a butterfly perched atop his big nose entered Alfred's mind. He wished Ivan used his phone on the job, wondering what Ivan actually looked like while working. The phone was harder to hack when it was turned completely off; Ivan normally kept it like that during the day while Alfred was away.

"Oh. That reminds me. One moment, Mr. FBI." Ivan walked off out of view.

An idea began to take shape in Alfred's mind, replacing the image of Ivan and the butterfly. Really, allowing Ivan to go that whole slot of time without documentation was a bad strategy, especially if Ivan really *was* a dangerous Russian intelligence agent. Who knew what he could be up to? And with all the gray division field agents being abducted by the Mafia, apparently, there would be less people to go out and make sure Ivan wasn't, like, putting poison into the plants or something. Alfred could step up and ask. Alfred wanted to see Ivan irl.

And speaking of Ivan, where the heck was he?

Alfred instinctively leaned forward before forgetting it was impossible to see around the kitchen through Ivan's phone. He was positioned so he was staring at Ivan's undecorated refrigerator. He couldn't even hear Ivan, though he remembered Ivan had excused himself.

Ivan never did this. After dishes he would always make himself a lunch for the next day, spend another thirty minutes online, read a little of the book he was slowly working through, check his phone again, and then get ready for bed. Alfred stared frustratedly at the screen, willing it to shift. "Hey, get back over here!" he protested. "You can't just leave me hanging like this!"

From the other room came a thump and a crinkle of plastic that sounded like an empty Doritos bag.

"Ivan!" Alfred huffed. "Don't make me do it!" He brought up a tab of the phone's controls. His finger hovered over the mouse. "Alright, you asked for it. Hear that? I'm doing it, Braginsky!" He pressed a button, making the phone burst into a frantic buzzing.

A few seconds later Ivan reentered the kitchen, his soft boi face appearing innocent and concerned through the screen. Alfred shut the phone's buzzing off, crossing his arms smugly. "Explain yourself."

Ivan, however, didn't say anything. He picked up the phone, opened it, and went straight to his meme account. Alfred felt betrayed when Ivan didn't speak any more, just swiped through his feeds. "So close," he mumbled to himself, having switched back to Russian. Alfred was a bit startled by this, as well; if Ivan knew (or thought he knew) that no one was going to hear and respond to him, why had he been using English when he spoke to "Mr. FBI?" Alfred accepted it was just another of his quirks that made Alfred's job easier. But it signified that their conversation was now over.

"Okay, whatever, it's chill, then." Alfred glanced at the time. He still had a few long hours to go before Ivan clocked in for the night. He had been caught off-guard by the unprompted half-conversation, and now was embarrassed at how he had whined about being ignored. Deep down, Alfred didn't really believe Ivan was a criminal or a spy. Criminals didn't get drunk on vodka home alone and laugh so pleasantly. Spies didn't jump on their beds in excitement whenever it snowed and knit their own oven mitts. Ivan was as ordinary and unassuming and simple as one could be, and immigrant or otherwise he had absolutely no reason to be on the FBI black list.

So Alfred sighed and settled into his cubicle for another evening of memes, same as always. He waited, watched and waited, stole food from Toris and waited, but it turned out that Mr. FBI didn't even get a "Goodnight."

Ivan had no intention of telling his phone goodnight. In fact, he had been reading (and posting) so many FBI memes lately that he left his phone on his bed under the covers in paranoia while he went to the bathroom. But not because it was gross to have someone watching him do his business, which it was. It was because under his sink, squeezed behind the water pipe, was a laptop computer no one knew about but himself and an invisible faction of Russian hackers. Stored on that computer was vital information he had been slowly leeching from the Smithsonian Institute. He didn't know what the circle would do with the info when he sent it, wrapped up with ribbons and bows over a deep web email provider, but he knew if he didn't do his job there would be consequences. He made sure to flush the toilet and run the water on his way out.

Ivan hopped into bed and picked his phone back up, humming as if nothing had happened. He refused to look at the camera lens again, but chided himself. If someone really *was* watching him, he would know. He distracted himself by checking his meme account once more.

Ivan buried his body under the massive pile of blankets, turning off the lamp and letting his phone screen be the only source of light in the room. He had read that blue light before bed destroyed the eyes, but figured he was already too far gone in that direction to fix anything now. Someone had commented "Congratulations! Heart emoji, fireworks emoji, clapping hands emoji," on his most recent post. Ivan's breaths picked up as he doubled back to check his follower count, gasping when he saw it.

He had broken one million.

Chapter End Notes

government hooker - gaga

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chief Arthur Kirkland of the black division roared through the cubicles, a stormcloud of papers following in his wake. “Francis Bonnefoy is *gone* !”

“We don’t know that yet,” Chief Elizabeta Héderváry of the gray division mumbled, holding her index finger over her earpiece. The phone call rang and rang, and they grew more impatient the longer it went unanswered. “Damn it, you loon, pick *up* .”

Ludwig Beilschmidt rose suddenly to his feet from the cubicle across from Alfred, scaring the *scheiße* out of Alfred and making him choke on his Starbucks—his second Starbucks in less than twenty-four hours. It was six in the morning. “Vargas’s camera is down!”

Héderváry grumbled to herself. “We should wait. To make sure we haven’t made a mistake. After all, Bonnefoy could just be—”

“We *can’t* wait!” Ludwig protested. “They already have my brother, and Antonio! The gray division is defunct! Bad things could be happening as we speak. Someone needs to go in now. I volunteer myself.”

Alfred snorted, throwing off his headphones at last and rising to his feet as well to join the discussion. “Wait just a blessed second. You’re not going in. *I’m* going in.” Alfred felt assaulted; Ludwig had only started his position as monitor a few weeks ago, probably due to his brother Gilbert’s influence! Also he was gay for his subject. (Like, *really* gay. Alfred considered *himself* to be a bit gay, but Ludwig’s gayness put that bit of him to shame. And, yeah, sure, the attachment also jeopardized his trustworthiness, but whatever.)

Arthur Kirkland shook his head immediately. “No. Agent Beilschmidt the Younger is correct. With the monitor down, Ludwig will at least have Vargas’s last location, while you still have someone to watch.”

Toris awkwardly stood, bending his back over the cubicle as if he wasn't sure he was welcome in the conversation. "Um, have you considered… Well, one time, Felicks got mad and threw his phone against the wall and broke it. I had to monitor him through only his laptop for a week. How long has—"

"He's been down since twelve thirty-six this morning," Ludwig supplied with a glance at his screen, grabbing his jacket. "Last location: somewhere north, downtown."

"Francis isn't picking up," Héderváry growled, ripping out the earpiece. "Maybe the gray division really *is* defunct. Alrighty. What do you say, Chief?"

"I say I'll let him go, Chief," replied Kirkland. "After all, we have nothing on Vargas yet." He turned to Beilschmidt. "But you must keep your personal cam on at all times. If there's even the slightest *whisper* of trouble, radio in at once."

"Affirmative." Ludwig was already halfway into the elevator.

Alfred huffed loudly, facing his bosses. "Fine! But I'm taking an extra long lunch break!"

Ivan liked to walk around town during his lunch breaks. He and his paper bag full of last night's stroganoff took a stroll down the National Mall, enjoying the summer sunshine. His neck was sweating like crazy—he had never really adjusted to the sweltering DC climate—but he enjoyed watching his scarf billow around him in the occasional gusts of wind. Up on the hill where the Washington Monument stood, it was windier.

Ivan sat against the roots of a tree a respectable distance from the giant obelisk. Its long shadow stretched languidly across the empty earth, bordering The Ellipse northward. He enjoyed the surreal feeling of being here; the closer you got to the Monument, the quieter the city was, and the more menacing seemed the parade circle of American flags surrounding the spire. People seemed afraid to stray onto the wide green, clinging instead to the concrete walking paths as they approached. Ivan had a wide berth between bicyclists on the street and tourists on the hill; he relaxed and dug into his meal.

People-watching was one of Ivan’s favorite hobbies, aside from memeing and cooking and knitting and drinking, in that order. Gardening was a dandy profession, but alas, it was lonely. Sometimes he worked alongside volunteers, but often he ended up talking to the plants. He wondered what his FBI agent made of that and blushed at the thought. Then he realized that, in talking to his phone and pretending it was an FBI agent, he was doing the same exact thing.

Food trucks, maintenance crews and tourists passed by down on the street. Ivan occasionally waved to some, who gave him confused smiles and half-waves back. Americans were friendly; at least the ones that didn’t look like politicians. Squirrels and ladies in pantsuits were also friendly, but crowds of families all wearing the same color shirt and pigeons were not. Ivan’s eyes latched onto one man who was making his way downtown, walking fast. He held one hand up to an earpiece and the other around a bag of Wang Yao’s *Wok & Roll* food truck takeout. Politician or businessman? Ivan couldn’t tell just yet. He squinted and leaned in for a closer analysis.

His skin color was much darker than Ivan's. His blond hair was dirtier blond than Ivan’s, and he was tall—but not as tall as Ivan. He wore a dark casual suit and dark sunglasses. Ivan smiled. He was a sucker for guys in shades. Just as the man neared his spot, Ivan lifted a hand to wave.

Their eyes met across a crowded street—or, at least, Ivan presumed they made eye contact, because he couldn’t see any eyes behind the sunglasses. However, the guy stopped abruptly in his tracks. When he opened his mouth his voice was loud and befuddled. “Holy guacamole!”

“Oh,” said Ivan, unmoving. “Hello.”

The man glanced up and down and around the scene. Then, after a few more seconds of staring at Ivan, his expression unreadable, he took a step closer. “Uh, hi.”

“Hi,” Ivan echoed. “I am wondering. Are you politician or businessperson?”

Another step closer. He was clenching the bag of Chinese food awkwardly tight. “Businessperson,” he answered, quickly, tensely.

“Oh, good. I don’t like politicians. What kind of business?” Ivan wondered, sitting up straighter.

“Politicians sure do suck ass,” the man replied straightforwardly. Instead of answering the second question, he introduced one of his own. “Um, say, what are you eating? It looks good.”

Ivan lifted his Tupperware for the man to see, and smiled brightly. “I will let you try if you tell me your name!” (He left the man’s question unanswered in turn; Ivan could be stubborn and mysterious, too, if he wanted.)

Maybe it was his imagination, but the man flinched. He shifted his weight, but obviously the culinary appeal was winning him over, as he took a step in even closer. “My name. Right. I’m...My name is...um. You can call me…”

Ivan waited, leaning back on his hands in the grass. “Do not think too hard,” he teased. “You can write it down and I can read it if you want.”

This made the man break into a sudden grin. “Read. Yes. Well, I’ll have you know my name’s Alfred, I’m nineteen, and I never fucking learned how to read.”

A beat.

Then, Ivan felt his heart swell with pure joy, and a sharp peal of laughter burst out of him from somewhere buried deep inside. He recognized the reference easily. “The Vine!”

“Alfred” looked away. Quietly and quickly, he wheezed out, “Ahhh, I’m sorry, sorry if it’s cringey…”

Ivan gave a grin of his own. “It is not cringe. It is dank.”

“...Right.” Alfred turned back and stared at him for a second, before whipping off his shades and falling to a crouch in front of Ivan’s picnic. Ivan was delighted; he wore *actual* glasses under the sunglasses, and under *those* , his eyes were as blue as the sky! “Okay. But now you gotta gimme the food, pal. You promised.”

“Oh!” Ivan realized he was still holding the plate of beef stroganoff. “I do not have another fork…”

“Oh, hang on a hot second—I got it.” Alfred dug around in his takeout bag and victoriously extracted a pair of chopsticks. “Yao has yelled at me before, but I swear this’ll work. I mean, as long as it’s not poisoned or anything.” He made perplexing eye contact with Ivan.

Ivan giggled. He watched as the “businessman” misused the chopsticks struggling to pick up a cluster of cold noodles, and, surprisingly, after a few tries, succeeded. “You know Wang Yao?”

Alfred shrugged and made a vague grunt, his mouth full, sauce covering his face. *Adorable?!1!?* “We are acquainted, I guess.”

Ivan leaned closer. “In business?” Wang Yao’s Wok & Roll food truck was a common sight all around town. Ivan would see it on one end of the Mall in the morning, and on the complete other end by the afternoon. He had a theory there were more than one truck, but hadn’t been able to prove it yet.

“Sure, if you really wanna call it ‘business.’ I always buy his food cuz it’s damn s’well, and, as a compliment for being a regular customer, he always rips me off and charges me extra.” Alfred grinned again, as if he found this hilarious. Ivan laughed a little. “Oh! Hey, wanna read the fortune cookie?”

Ivan was a bit concerned Alfred hadn't said anything about Ivan's *own* food yet, but was forced to let it pass, since Alfred was already digging in the bag for the cookie. "Okay." He wondered if Alfred was superstitious, as well as hyperactive.

"It says *Secret lives destroy lives, aru.* " Alfred glanced quickly up at Ivan. "Hah. Wow, if that ain't sinister. Um, okay. Our lucky numbers are three and twelve, nine and eleven, and ten thousand thirty-two."

It was getting cold under this shade, Ivan thought. He wanted the sun to come back and burn his face. He would be able to read Alfred's expressions better in the light, too; he decided liked how expressive Alfred was. Ivan was a fan of emojis, but you just didn't get the same kind of interaction online, where no one showed their faces. Not that having online friends was bad. Since Alfred seemed to be somewhat woke in memeculture, Ivan wondered if Alfred was one of his million followers. "Ten thousand thirty-two is very specific."

"No, but I'm like, what's with the nine eleven thing?" Alfred threw the little paper to the ground, crunching off his end of the cookie. With his mouth full, he went on. "If you ask me, it wasn't even Bush. Oh, *no* , honey. *Clearly* the attacks were orchestrated by the aliens." *Crunch, crunch.* "Actually, you'd be surprised by just how much history the aliens were involved in." He said this as if it was pure fact.

Ivan stared at him for a second. Then, slowly, he began to hum the *X-Files* theme.

Alfred started to guffaw. It was a little obnoxious, and a lot loud, and Ivan never wanted it to end. By thinking this, he cursed himself, because just then Alfred's laughing spiel halted and he sighed out, "Dude, I have to go. I'll be late and my boss is already mad at me. Thanks for letting me eat your food and all."

Ivan inhaled. "Did you like it?"

"Oh, totally." A draft of wind made Alfred's hair stick up, and he brushed it out of the way while he put his shades back on. "It was, as you said, 'dank.'"

Even Ivan cringed finally at that one. He had finally reached approximate fluency in English —or at least Memglish—and wasn't sure "dank" was a good adjective to use to describe food. But it was too late to coach Alfred on his technique, because Alfred was standing up, and he was gathering his food bag, and he was *leaving* —

"I am glad you talked to me," Ivan said hastily. "If your boss is mad at you just fire them and come talk to me more!"

Alfred stretched out his arms over his head. "Hah. Wish that was how that worked, but...nah. He's a respectable, good guy, but he like, blows a gasket every time I take a coffee break. I really better go."

"...Oh." Ivan was running out of things to say. He had hoped Alfred would explain where his job was and what else he liked to eat and what his phone number was and where he lived and who else he knew in DC, and was just about to begin asking him these questions when Alfred interrupted yet again.

"See you 'round, then, Ivan!" Alfred waved. *A "See you 'round," then.* So it wasn't over.

Ivan picked up the dropped fortune slip from the ground and stretched out on his back below the tree. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Alfred stroll off eastwardly, in the direction Ivan himself would have to be making his way soon. "Do I look very silly, Mr. FBI?" he asked to the heavens. "I just want a friend, and you are my only friend, but I cannot be seeing you, so it doesn't count."

A lifetime ago, he had thought he had found friends. When everyone on the surface web would only use him for memes, Ivan had directed himself to the deep web, and in turn the dark web, and months later had somehow ended up owing thousands to some nameless corporation interface. Moving to America with what he had left, Ivan had become a grunt worker for the hacker circle. He would hack the government sites whenever he could sneak into the computers. Ivan was never able to read the content he stole, but it obviously had to be of some importance, because he didn't even know the names of his "employers." It was funny Alfred talked about his boss getting mad at him; if Ivan screwed up, the circle would stop shielding him, probably leading Ivan to be locked up by order of more than one country.

Ivan had dreams of a life back in Russia, playing in the forest with his sisters, then sitting before the fire while Katya knitted him scarfs and Natalya read fairy tales aloud. He missed home.

Beep, beep ! Ivan sat up, but it was only the sound of the Wok & Roll food truck honking at someone in the street as it migrated after the lunch rush. Ivan smiled to himself. He had caught it on the move, so maybe there was only one. *Secret lives destroy lives, aru.* It was a message from wise old Wang Yao to him, and he just knew it.

Ivan pictured Alfred again, and his last words. “See you ‘round, Ivan!” Something seemed off.

No one ever talked to Ivan, really. Ivan had had to initiate their conversation, and to practically bribe Alfred to keep him talking.

There it was. Ivan had asked for Alfred’s name, but Ivan had never given his own name. Ivan had a near-perfect memory; he wouldn’t have just forgotten that detail of the conversation, and he knew he would remember having talked to Alfred before. Ivan did not wear a nametag, nor was his name emblazoned anywhere else. “Alfred” had known his name.

Now that he thought about it, “Alfred” kept a pretty secretive life, too.

“Nothing!” Ludwig had returned, throwing his jacket over the cubicle wall and collapsing at his desk in defeat. “Vargas is...he *must* be innocent. I found absolutely nothing! It was just like Toris said; he dropped his phone in a pot of boiling water. It’s useless now. I do not understand!”

Chief Héderváry patted him on the shoulder. “You’re doing fine. He’s just a tricky one. You’ll have to monitor him live. We’ll figure it out soon, and your brother and the rest of the gray division will be back here drinking and flirting and sleeping on the job and causing shenanigans like normal in no time!”

Alfred, normally the first to get the popcorn, wasn't even paying attention to the drama anymore. His desk smelled like soy sauce. It was four-fifteen. His laptop was up. Ivan would be on within the hour. Tonight, he was understandably more eager to see what would happen once the face filled the screen.

Gosh darn—Alfred would have to rethink the whole visual now! Ivan had turned out to be much taller irl, and his eyes were most definitely closer to the purple side of blue. He had also acted much friendlier than Alfred had expected, although the creepy undertone wasn't mistaken. Part of the anxiety had been hiding himself; Alfred had tried to think up a fake name and excuse, but found himself impossibly unable to lie when Ivan stared at him so intensely.

"Hello, Mr. FBI!" Right on cue, the man's happy face appeared on the laptop. Alfred sighed. "Wow, have I got some news for you!"

Alfred wondered if Ivan would make a good monitoring agent.

Chapter End Notes

criminal - britney

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Wow, I'm really impressed with how much support I got so soon after I published this messy joke of a story! I'll keep it up, then! I have at least a few more chapters planned, but no idea how long this'll end up being. Whatever happens, I hope you'll stay with me and enjoy! ;)(;

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The phone screen's light was blinding throughout the total darkness of Ivan's bedroom, and he had to shield his eyes for a few seconds before they adjusted. Rolling over, he checked the time on his clock. 3:49 in the morning. He mumbled in annoyance to himself and faced his ringing phone once more. Clearing his throat, he pressed the answer button without even reading who was calling. He felt like that one sleepy gal in that one Vine waking up with the pouring water when he said, "Hello?"

" *Privet, Ivan.* "

The adrenaline that had filled Ivan when the ringtone ("Take On Me" by a-ha) had gone off subsided when the familiar voice hit him. "Natalya!"

"I have missed you, brother," she admitted, in lilting Russian Ivan hadn't heard in forever. He sighed happily. "How are you?"

"It's three in the morning," he replied, shifting in his sweaty covers, "but in fact I'm doing very well! How are you?"

"Oh, no! Oops!" Another recognizable, yet strained voice echoed from thousands of miles away over the line. "Natalya, we forgot! Ivan, I am so sorry. You must be exhausted!"

"Katya!" Ivan laughed. He put a finger briefly over his phone's speaker, as if he could touch their voices themselves. Natalya and Yekaterina hadn't spoken to him in ages. Natalya was a businesswoman; Yekaterina was a humble farmer gal. "You are both here! But how?"

Natalya cut in. "I am visiting Katya in Ukraine. We were thinking of visiting you."

Ivan sat straight up in bed, staring in awe at the shadowed wall and dresser in front of him. “So we can all be together!”

Yekaterina’s giggle made the phone vibrate. Another sound Ivan missed. “Well, it has been a while, don’t you think?”

It had been *so* long. “I miss you very much.” He slumped over. As siblings, they had always been close, but Ivan had been wary their relationship strained farther apart the more they grew. They didn’t talk and play as much as they used to, living back in Russia. “I started to think you would never call.”

“That’s not true,” Natalya immediately responded, with a small degree of ferocity. Ivan snorted lightly to himself, imagining them standing in Katya’s tiny kitchen, passing her cord phone back and forth.

“I have just saved up enough for something special,” Katya informed them. “Oh, this will be so fun! How about sometime next week?”

“Plane tickets are expensive,” added Natalya.

“Of course.” Ivan picked his lip. He had a couple of bitcoins saved up on his secret laptop; maybe he could help them with the ticket problem. Anything to finally see a familiar face. “Next week is good! I will start making space!”

“We will see you soon.”

.

Alfred and his brother Matthew shared some differences. One was the way they greeted the day; Alfred’s way included Starbucks and stretches at six AM, while Matthew’s included multiple trips of the snooze button and desperate attempts to become one with the beavers by building himself a blanket fort and burrowing inside of it. In this way, Alfred was a better candidate for an early monitoring schedule. So, surprised was he to find out from the log he

kept on his laptop that Ivan had already been on his phone for twelve whole minutes—at three AM.

Alfred rubbed his eyes, making sure he wasn't just hallucinating. Took another sip of coffee. There it was, right there on the screen. Alfred couldn't rewind the log program like a TV show, but could only see at what times and places Ivan had used his phone. The location pointed to Ivan's apartment, but what would the guy be doing with his phone there at three in the morning? Ivan slept like a bear, judging by the way he grumbled to himself upon waking up. He would have had to schedule the wake up time. This was the "suspicious activity" Arthur wanted.

Instead of first reporting the activity, however, Alfred decided to wait. After all, he was only a few minutes away from Ivan's normal wake-up time. He pulled his laptop into bed with him and closed his eyes, only opening them again when Ivan's face filled the screen.

"Good morning, Mr. FBI!"

Oh god, this again. Alfred was amused Ivan was still keeping it up, and even smiled a little to himself in his sleep-weakened state. Last night Ivan's "news" had been a twenty-minute-long rant detailing their lunch meeting by the Washington Monument. Alfred had been embarrassed in about twenty different ways, especially at hearing how Ivan described him. But the situation was also too ironic not to laugh at; Ivan would have a rude awakening when he discovered "Mr. FBI" and Alfred were actually the same person.

If he discovered. Alfred violently rubbed his eyes. No. Not "when." Not even "if." No, Ivan would never find out, of course. There was no reason why he would ever find out. It would be funny, but no. No way.

"I hope you had a good sleep," the Russian drawled, yawning, which in turn made Alfred yawn. "Today I want to meet Alfred again, so I am going to picnic in the same place. Maybe if he is a businessman, he will have the same schedule and he will be walking there again."

"Dude, don't get your hopes up," Alfred mumbled. "Alfred's got like a bajillion things to do this morning."

“I like Alfred.” Ivan sighed and rolled over.

Alfred slapped his pillow. “ *Ahhgggg.* Shut it. Stop being cute.”

A giggle from the other end of the link. “I can only wonder if Alfred thinks I am cute too.”

“ *Oh, you little —*”

Ivan sat up. “If that is his real name. I am still not sure if he is lying to me.” He unconsciously rubbed his neck as he stretched, and Alfred was reminded of the scars there. He looked away. Yesterday Ivan had been wearing his scarf, even in the eighty-degree weather. Alfred had always wondered why Ivan left for work with his scarf on and came home still wearing it. This small, cruel detail restored Alfred’s worries; if Ivan truly believed he was being watched right now, he would be wearing his scarf.

“He wasn’t lying. I mean, I tried, but, like, giving any other name would have sounded bad. All I could think of at the time was ‘Bob’ or something and I didn’t want to call myself ‘Bob.’” Alfred sat up as well, snatching his glasses from his nightstand and propping the laptop on his thighs.

The conversation seemed to be over as Ivan finished stretching and slunk off to the bathroom. Bored, Alfred pulled up a visual of Ivan’s phone screen, which he had left glowing on his bed. It showed Ivan’s meme account. Alfred was just about to begin reading it when the screen turned off on its own. He groaned. He could still hack into it, of course, but at this point did anything matter?

“ *Two dudes chillin’ in their own bedrooms,* ” Alfred hummed to himself, beginning to roll out of the covers and start getting ready, himself. “ *One city and two screens apart ‘cuz they’re not gay!* ”

He heard Ivan come out of the bathroom and begin to change into his work clothes. Luckily the camera was pointed at the ceiling. (There was an unofficial term for these intimate times that the monitors of the black division referred to as “awkward moments.” Usually they meant anxious coffee breaks.)

“Bye, then,” Alfred mumbled as Ivan plopped his phone into his work bag and the camera went black. “Go ahead. Don’t tell me what you were doing at three early this morning. It’s fine. Not like it could finally clear your name off the stupid list or anything. You’re right.”

“Goodbye, Mr. FBI,” Ivan whistled, without a care in the world. He was so damn innocent. Alfred was about to give some half-snarky, half-genuine response, when something across his room burst into song. “Africa” by Toto, in fact. Alfred was confused for a second before he remembered it meant his phone was ringing and he was receiving a call.

“Aw, shit.” Alfred threw off his covers and dove to answer it. The display showed the name of none other than Arthur Kirkland. “Howdy.”

“Bloody hell, Jones! Where *are* you?”

“At home! Fiddlesticks, I forgot to tell you. I worked my first shift from home. Ivan just left. Er, Braginsky.”

A heaving exhale. “Good God, man! We thought you had been abducted by the Mafia!”

“Oh. Well, nah.” Alfred felt bad. He could just see the Chief doing the smh. “Don’t you worry! I’ll, I’ll be—”

“Yes, you *better* be here soon! It’s only Toris and Elizabeta and I and Ludwig hasn’t left yet and *boy* is it stuffy. What is it with staff these days?” Kirkland gave an impatient huff.

“I’m on my way right now. In fact, I’m just getting into the car,” Alfred said as he rose to his feet and did a toe-touch, stifling another yawn. “Have to hang up. No texting while driving, you know.”

“Yes. Right. Be safe. Wait. This isn’t texting, it’s a phone call—”

Alfred hung up. “Still a cause for distraction.”

He took a shower and relaxed on the couch with a bowl of cereal and a robe, too lazy to get dressed just yet. Ivan didn’t use his phone again until the late afternoon, so Alfred technically had plenty of time before he had to go to work. He glanced over at his TV table. On top of it lay a stack of video games he hadn’t yet completed. Bored, Alfred started sifting through them.

One disc toppled off the pile to the floor, and when Alfred picked it up, he was surprised to see his name, along with another, both written in felt marker under a semicircle of letters spelling out *STARSCRAPERZ!*

Back in college, Alfred and this quiet Japanese kid named Kiku Honda had gotten endlessly bored in their computer class and teamed up to create a video game, becoming best friends along the way. The game was successful, too; with Alfred on programming and Kiku on art, they had churned out a basic RPG with a short plot by the end of the semester. Alfred hadn’t played it in ages, though he and Kiku still kept in touch. Kiku was an employee of the Smithsonian.

Jeez, Ivan worked at the Smithsonian, kinda. Alfred hadn’t thought of that. What if they even knew each other.

Suddenly, he felt very cold. He glanced quickly over his shoulder and around the apartment’s small living room, but of course no one was there. He released the disc and replaced it by clutching a pillow to his chest. Alfred needed to get out, to be with people. He needed to see Kiku, because Kiku would be ecstatic Alfred had found their old game, and Kiku might have more information on Ivan that Alfred didn’t yet have access to. He needed to see Matthew, because Matthew always had wise words of advice, and he knew that Matthew tended to get lonely and would want to see him as well. He needed to forget that he had only just been bowling with Gilbert on Friday, and now Gilbert was gone, and what did that mean?

“Aaaaand, that’s enough thinking for today,” Alfred declared, standing up. “I’ve reached my max. No more.”

He dressed in his usual dark casual suit, sliding the token sunglasses on over his normal glasses. (He thought glasses that tinted automatically were a hassle, and if he was ever given a promotion, he would get the really cool FBI glasses that had x-ray, night-vision, and lazer-eye features anyway.) He even tried to wrestle with a tie but gave up. Alfred stuffed his computer in his bag and took transit to headquarters.

This time, Chief Héderváry wasn't the one to sign him in. An anonymous man in black scanned Alfred's credentials without uttering a word. Regrettably, Alfred found this sad and boring. "What, is there some kind of secret Eye of Providence in there you're lookin' for?"

Slowly, the man tilted his head up. "You know that only the Illuminati agents are required to carry those."

"Obviously." Alfred rolled his eyes. He made it to the elevator without a hitch.

When the doors slid open on the negative two-hundredth floor, Alfred expected Chief Arthur Kirkland to be there waiting with his arms crossed. He wasn't. Kirkland, Héderváry, and Ludwig all stood around the lounge's dry erase board, talking rapidly. Alfred shrugged and made his way over to Toris's cubicle.

"Ah!" The Lithuanian shut his laptop screen and swiveled around so quickly Alfred almost blushed himself.

"Um, what's going on?" he asked.

"Nothing!" Toris retorted. "I mean, er, I'm just admiring my new SAVE THE WHALES poster!"

"...You mean *magnet?* "

"Yes! It is quite nice. I am starting to liking it very much." They both gazed at the magnet, taped to the carpet-covered cubicle wall.

Alfred let it go. Whatever horrific action he assumed Felicks was undertaking couldn't compete with the rising ferocity of whatever was happening in the lounge. "Cool. Knew you would. But seriously, what's up." He jammed a thumb over his shoulder.

"...Oh." Toris stood, tripping on his chair a little, peering to see closer. "They have been doing that all morning. Writing and drawing and printing out articles and pinning them up. I think they think they are close to solving the mystery."

It got quiet as the two watched. Ludwig Beilschmidt, in near-hysterics judging by the two strands of hair that escaped his gel swoop, stabbed a finger at a picture of his suspect, which was the center of a network of intersecting red lines connected to related circled words, photos, and newspaper cutouts. "And if you direct your attention to *Exhibit F* , you'll realize just how much of a mastermind Feliciano Vargas truly is!"

Kirkland was skeptical. "But that's just a flattering picture of him using a broom. It doesn't prove anything."

Héderváry was sympathetic. "Ludwig, we know Antonio Fernandez-Carriedo disappeared on-duty up on Embassy Row last Wednesday. Gilbert went MIA walking home from bowling on Friday, and Francis's last connection with us was on his way to work yesterday morning. In *all* these pictures, collected around the same times judging from the stamps, Vargas is at home in his kitchen."

"Exactly!" Ludwig declared. "Vargas has positioned himself in just the right place at just the right time in every single instance!"

Kirkland scratched his chin. "So there are two solutions. Either we've got the wrong guy, or he's strategically fooling us with these images somehow, which would explain why his camera went down briefly early last morning."

"Yesterday he was working at a market," Ludwig informed. "I observed him from afar, and nothing seemed amiss. The strangest thing was the way he talked to people, always smiling and laughing and keeping up a conversation for twenty minutes about things as meaningless as gelato cramps! Then he went home, of course, and slept. He sleeps a lot."

“Which would explain why he’s home so often,” Kirkland countered, turning away. “Whatever. If you think you’ve got a lead, take it. Not like we have anyone else here to do it — *oi!* Alfred F. Jones!”

Alfred leaned to Toris. “I’ve never known how to respond when he says the ‘Oi!’ at me. Like, what does it even mean? Chief! Hey, amigo!”

“Don’t you ‘amigo’ me!” Arthur pointed a finger in Alfred’s face. “You’re an hour late!”

Toris wisely swiveled his chair back around. The black division chief was a force when he was angry, and it was a fact he was often angry around Alfred (admittedly for good reason).

“My car broke down due to distracted driving,” Alfred explained, trying to sidestep Arthur. “It was tragic. I waited in the sweltering heat, wishing for the good ol’ days when I could just stick a saddle on any four-legged animal, or mount a big rock like the pioneers—”

“Boy, you don’t even own a car!”

Alfred paused, his train of lie derailing. “What?” This was saddening to hear. Even if his explanation had been a lie, he still did own a car. Or at least he shared one. With Matt...who was using it at the moment. “I’ve got a Ford F-150!”

Arthur turned his nose up. “That’s no car.”

A slight to Alfred’s honor! He prepared to defend himself. “Hey! You wanna argue about cars, old man? You drive on the left!”

Kirkland put his hands to his temples. “Stop this at once. Now *you’re* distracting me. The point is we need you here, Alfred. We’re understaffed and low on morale—just look at poor Toris! He’s barely hanging on!”

Indeed, Toris looked ready to run a letter-opener through himself. “Please get out of my cubicle.”

They left.

Arthur lowered his voice. “What I mean is I feel better with you here, doing work where I can see you. Protected. You understand. To finish this investigation we all need to work where we can see each other, and it’s now of even *more* utmost importance we all *are* working. Chief Hédervári and Ludwig are both going out on separate missions today, and—”

“Agh, dude.” Alfred scratched his head. “This makes it so bad. I was actually just going to ask for some time off.”

They froze outside of Alfred’s cubicle. Kirkland looked almost sad. “That I cannot give you.”

Alfred clenched his teeth. Were his working hours being extended, then? Did the Chief expect him to check in every morning, now? What happened to only hacking phones when phones were being used? “I only wanna see my brother.”

“Ludwig wants to see his brother, too,” Arthur sighed. “Until we get a lead on the Mafia situation, I’d like you to check in every morning. Maybe in your spare time, you can even help us!”

Alfred crossed his arms, unsatisfied, but willing to take the bait. “I still get lunch breaks.”

“So be it. A single hour, *only* . And not today.”

Alfred’s shoulders fell. That morning he had even mocked at Ivan that he might not be able to see him at lunch since he had “like a bajillion things to do,” but now that he actually *knew* he was restrained, everything felt worse. Itchy.

“Alfred?” Alfred looked up. The Chief had taken on a softer tone. “We really do care. Say, how is your work going? Anything noticeable or suspicious happening with Braginsky?”

Alfred met his eyes, steady and sure. “Nope; nada. Nothing at all.”

.

Ivan was blaring Spotify. “Do you like my cleaning playlist, Mr. FBI? I am sorry you have listen to it so many times.” He made sure to leave his phone in his bedroom while tidying up the bathroom; more specifically, the cabinet under the sink. He ran the water while logging into the computer, checking his inbox quickly for any messages from the circle. He didn’t get a “thanks for the highly confidential intel,” and only a curt email dictating his next order. Ivan shut the laptop with a grimace and flushed the blue cleaning fluid down the toilet.

“I want everything to look good when my sisters come over!” he proclaimed, picking the phone back up. “Do not be afeared. You will like my sisters, Mr. FBI. I hope so. A family visit will make me seem less boring.”

Ivan didn’t have a particular image for “Mr. FBI,” but the longer he kept up the joke, the more his mind worked to develop a sort of persona for the character that fit the needs of whatever state Ivan was in. He imagined Mr. FBI cast in shadow at a desk, eating popcorn and saying, “ *Of course I will love your sisters, Ivan! Just as much as I love watching you! uwu!* ”

The dream was entertaining. Ivan stared directly at his camera, found those purple dots inside, and laughed.

He let his phone be with a final smile and plugged it into the charger while he cleaned out the Tupperware he had used for lunch. Today he had sat in the same spot as yesterday, and kept a close eye on the street. But it was a true bust.

“Alfred” hadn’t shown.

Chapter End Notes

video phone - beyoncé

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Golly wow. Plots. So far now, we've met/heard of/mentioned every character appearing in this story except for three. I'm real excited. Hope y'all are too!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’ll have you know that I’m highkey not hyped about this,” Alfred muttered to the Chief as he checked in. Not even a *Parks and Rec* Paunch Burger “child size” coffee could fix his mood, or his messy hair and the dark circles under his eyes. He had been awake since three that morning looking out for another of Ivan’s phone calls, but with no avail. It was almost like Ivan knew he was watching and had taken preventative measures. Or like Alfred was beginning to get paranoid.

“What was that?” asked Kirkland, looking up from his ever-present clipboard. The office was sleepy and slow-moving in its early hours, and there were no new missing members.

“I said good mornin’, sir.” Alfred coughed and collapsed at his desk with so much dedication the wheels on his wheely chair shrieked in surprise.

Also—apparently Ivan’s sisters were now visiting? What was up with that? Alfred would have to search his files of notes, for in this state at least he only remembered Ivan vaguely having a family back in Russia. It was whack. The way Ivan had talked to him last night gave Alfred worries, too. Was their relationship ready for a “meet the family” visit? No. No it was not. Alfred had some work to do.

He didn’t reach for the file cabinets, however. He didn’t report the news to Arthur. He didn’t even get out his computer. He shed his glasses, rested his head in his folded arms, and fell asleep.

Alfred dreamed he was playing *STARSCRAPERZ!* with Matthew, but all of the attacking aliens had Ivan’s face. They lost on the first wave.

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It was afternoon, and Ivan had a new assignment. The hacker circle’s orders were short and sweet: obtain a select handful of confidential files from the US government-protected Federal

Bureau of Investigation.

For once he was excited. Not because the files would be near-impossible to get ahold of, not because he would add a couple more life sentences to his record if he was caught, and not even because if he performed the operation successfully and *wasn't* caught, his debt to the circle would decrease marginally. He was excited because he was hacking the FBI, and he had never done anything near that caliber before, and the FBI obsession deep down in his starved brain was lighting up like a beacon. He had even been given an insider's hinting of traps to avoid in the email. How courteous.

"I'm coming for you, Mr. FBI!" he whispered to himself as he pruned a shrub. Dead leaves were swept away into a bag. His obsession was to the point where Ivan could only allow himself to think about his dark web misdeeds when his phone wasn't in his sight. (He still didn't believe the meme, of course, and was sure to remind himself of this every day.) "I won't hesitate, bitch."

Another thing Ivan forced out of his mind was Alfred, who hadn't showed up for lunch in two days now. A few hours ago Ivan had waited patiently under that darned giant obelisk and hadn't seen either Alfred *or* the *Wok & Roll* truck. Their Tuesday meeting must have been a chance fluke, so Ivan told himself to get over it for the time being; Alfred was only a guilty distraction. Ivan could remember him when he was done with this next task. The "businessman's" image had already become blurred in his head. Ivan even forgot that Alfred knew Ivan's name.

He snapped another dead stalk out of his way, now up to his elbows in milkweed and tithonia. Just like his worn overalls and boots, Ivan's hands would be covered in dead plant matter and beetle juice if not for his trusty rubber gloves. They were a bright cheery yellow, the exact shade of the sunflower in Ivan's windowsill. He noticed that more people smiled and waved back at him when he wore them, which made him very happy. Across the garden was another groundskeeper, whom Ivan directed a wave now. The teenager was too wrapped up in her earbuds to take notice. Ivan frowned sadly.

He was stationed in the butterfly pollinator gardens again, which was a two-way upside to his day. First, he loved working around the butterflies and the bugs. Second, he was near the National Museum of Natural History, in a position that would be helpful later on. One couldn't simply hack the FBI. Ivan needed a special gateway to their database, a gateway that could only be found using other US government software, if he knew his tech. If he didn't and this didn't work, he was screwed.

Usually, Ivan could hack the Smithsonian by hooking up to maintenance with a special cable he had acquired from an anonymous delivery source on the street a couple weeks after he had arrived in DC. Conveniently, Ivan also had full range and access to maintenance. But sometimes things were harder, and he had to actually go in and do it the manual way. Luckily, no one suspected the gardener. Museum staff just thought it was weird that the gardener was in the computer room. And since it was easier to get caught than it was to get intel, today would be a "hack in and get the hell out" kind of endeavor. And his shift was almost up.

Ivan's knees protested when he stretched up out of his squat to move his bucket and tools down the line. He froze when a squadron of flying insects zipped past him, recognizing them instantly as Russian honey bees (or *Apis mellifera* , not to be confused with the other popular Italian bee species *Apis mellifera ligustica* ; you could quickly differentiate species from their informational placards when you were the one polishing the placards and working around enthusiastic pollinator people all year). Ivan wasn't skittish around the monarch butterflies or even the hyperactive hummingbirds that frequented the garden because he saw all the creatures as his friends. But, according to all known laws of aviation, any bee that could survive the harsh Russian winters should be left alone. He knew firsthand.

Ivan tightened his scarf as he crouched back down. He had begun to sweat even more—not all the bees' fault or the excessive heat and humidity. He didn't have to retrieve his phone from his bag in the maintenance shed to know that it was almost four o'clock, almost the end of his shift. The teenager with the earbuds was already dusting off her jeans and heading out. Ivan kept a close eye on who else approached down the pathway. These next few minutes would be difficult.

After a moment's hesitation, Ivan too gathered his things. He waved farewell to the butterflies and the flowers and slowly strolled away, whistling to himself and sweating harder. He stored the bucket and tools, and as he reached for his work bag, he finally allowed further distraction to break the floodgates in his mind. He checked his phone before crossing the street, just glancing quickly at his meme page for the follower and like count. They had both gone stagnant; Ivan hadn't posted anything in a day, which was unlike him. He wiped the hair out of his eyes and powered his phone all the way down, wrapping it in a spare T-shirt and tossing it back into his bag. This way, if Mr. FBI could still hack into Ivan's phone if it was all the way off, he would only see dark fabric.

I am not a criminal about to throw himself into a very compromising position, Ivan thought to himself. *I am a simple plant man, so smol, so pure.*

He started up the steps to the Museum of Natural History. Just a mere block north were actual FBI headquarters. It was ninety degrees, yet Ivan felt like shivering.

He smiled at security as he approached. The entrance line was short, and Ivan was not apprehensive about being caught here. He hadn't needed to bring his cable or computer, and there were a lot of smelly clothes in his bag to conceal what he *had* brought, anyway. A cop prodded the clothes with a stick, ushered him through a metal detector, and just like that he was in.

The afternoon was growing late, so the crowds weren't thick, the staff was lax, and Ivan could navigate around easily. He pretended to oogle the giant elephant display for a minute or two, trying not to think about the people at the information desk some feet away. When Ivan moved in deeper, he felt eyes on his back. He slowly and innocently moved away, finding the button for an elevator.

He breathed in; he breathed out. Pictured Alfred's smile.

Ding! Ivan stepped into the elevator and pressed the "close doors" button.

"Excuse me!" Ivan's eyes zipped to find the source of the distress call. Someone was power-walking toward him, extending an arm. At this sight, Ivan reflexively stuck a hand in the path of the closing doors to keep them open, and immediately cursed himself.

An Asian-looking man wearing a museum worker's uniform and badge gratefully stepped into the elevator. "Thank you!" said he. "It takes forever to get one to come back."

Ivan smiled. "It is no problem!" He moved aside so the man could choose his floor.

"Ah, my apologies." Just before hitting the button, the man lurched back. "You were here first; you choose first."

“No, it is fine.” Ivan took another step to the side and bumped into the wall. “Where you were going is just fine.”

The man stared for a second, then recovered. “Oh. Um, thank you. Okay.” He gently pushed the button, and the elevator responded. The man then moved to stand on the other side of the elevator, as far away from Ivan as possible.

Ivan’s fingers clenched his bag tighter and tighter. If Mr. FBI was watching, he would most definitely be laughing at the awkwardness. Ivan had planned on taking a random floor to scope the place out, but now that an actual worker had arrived, maybe Ivan could just follow him and pretend to be a worker, too. Radical.

The man cleared his throat; Ivan looked over. The man was staring straight up ahead, watching the numbers change. His hands were folded professionally behind his back, allowing the nametag on his chest to be visible. Ivan squinted. *H-O-N—*

—Ding! The doors opened, and the man marched quickly out. Like a disoriented cat, Ivan followed.

Sure enough, the man swung straight into a door marked *STAFF ACCESS ONLY* . Ivan caught a glimpse of the interior and sighed internally. Success. Now he just had to pretend to look at exhibits until the man left.

The words on the wall were drowned out by the pounding in his ears. Ivan had only done this a few times before. *H*ck, I have only been to the Museum of Natural History few times before.* He knew that there were others, however, who did this kind of stuff much more regularly. Once, Ivan had caught glimpses of someone shadowing him in disguise, and had been so *sure* it was security, but had later caught them typing away at the same computer he had just hacked. Ivan therefore suspected that he wasn’t the only member of the circle here in Washington. Maybe right now some spy was lurking around, waiting for Ivan to move so they could sail in, cover him, and fix any mistakes he had made. The notion gave him a false sense of security—minding the pun, of course.

Ivan caught his reflection in the glass. With his contemplative, hollow expression, he looked pretty ominous. He wondered if Mr. FBI thought that. He wondered what Mr. FBI thought at *all* about him, before Ivan remembered that Mr. FBI wasn’t real, and Ivan only developed the

character as a sad way to cope with being alone, and that the museum worker from the elevator had just walked out the staff access door and around the corner out of sight and the door was now swinging shut…

His chance! Ivan swiveled and put a hand up to stop the door from closing, like stopping doors was his job. He didn't even check the hall to see if anyone had seen him. Ivan meant to leave no record except for his image on the cameras, which either would be passed over by security or edited by Ivan if he had the time and skill. But he had little of either as far as hacking security systems went, so he made a beeline for the closest computer and went straight to work.

The mouse was warm—good. This had to be the one the elevator man had just used. Ivan took a minute to brute-force the login, and then accessed the system. He let his mind ramble and his fingers fly. If the elevator man had already logged out then he probably wasn't planning on coming back here any time soon, but Ivan couldn't be sure. He typed faster.

Ivan broke through the network in short time. Knowing he was *inside* of the US government was terrifying, and it was an even stronger leap to get to the FBI. Their codes were lazer-tripped, but due to the info from the email, he knew the pathway. Ivan sweated harder than he had in the garden. *I've got you now, Mr. FBI.*

And there they were. Plain as day. A handful of personnel files, wrapped in code. Ivan didn't have time to inspect them, or—god forbid— *translate* them. He took his eyes off the screen for the first time he had since entering the room to reach into his work bag. Buried beneath his yellow gloves and extra clothes was a tiny USB flash drive-like device. When Ivan stole information, he put it onto this and transferred it back to his laptop at home, then cleared all data so the drive could be used again. Wasting no time, he plugged the sucker into the computer and ran a loop to copy the files.

Now Ivan just had to wait. He stretched out his hands and popped the pains in his neck. He had kept the lights off in the room, and now it was hurting his eyes. He couldn't tell if he was being watched by camera, since there were many red lights amongst all the machinery in the small room. Cables bound in zip-ties traversed the ceiling, and the blinking black boxes that lined the walls looked alien. If he listened over the hum of hardware, he could hear distant sounds coming from the museum. Any of them could be a SWAT team on their way to take him out.

When all the files had been copied and transferred onto the drive, Ivan closed out. He hastily unplugged the USB and chucked it into his bag, then spent time making sure he left no trace of himself before logging out. The computer was just shutting down when the staff access door to the room swung open and light flooded in.

It was the elevator man. He looked surprised to see Ivan sitting at the computer, like anyone would have looked. It was extremely hard for Ivan to hold back from screaming, “Please! Don’t tell MOoOoOoOM!”

Instead, he rose from the chair, shouldered his bag, and offered the short man a friendly smile. “Hello again!” He walked fast toward him, and this intimidation tactic worked, for the man backed up confusedly, allowing Ivan to shoulder past him and out the hall. “Have a good afternoon!”

“Uh…” Ivan felt the man’s eyes on him as he retreated briskly down the hall. “Good-Goodbye…”

He walked. And walked. And only when he had reached the elevator did he allow himself to glance back. Must look casual. The man had to believe Ivan was just a part of the museum. The man wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

Ivan exhaled carefully through his nose and pressed the button. The elevator ride was the loneliest and longest of his life. He made sure not to look at the camera, just in case the museum employee was watching him through it and recording his appearance. Once he had reached the first floor, Ivan stepped out of the elevator doors as soon as they had opened broad enough to fit his broad body. He became cautious of his fast walking pace and the red blush that was most likely creeping across his cheeks and told himself to calm down. *Just think of Alfred.* Alfred would be horrified by him. *Pretend to be wearing Alfred’s sunglasses, and that no one can see.* Secret lives destroy lives.

Ivan was outside, standing on the steps underneath the giant banners stretched between the massive columns. He could hear his heartbeat over the wind tunnel, but he had done it.

The subway ride home allowed Ivan some time to calm down, as it was easy to lose himself among the hordes of busy travelers. He sat in a slightly sticky seat by the doors and breathed slowly into his scarf. He almost reached into his bag for his phone and earbuds, but decided

to wait until home to open his phone. After all, it was possible that the data he had stolen contained Mr. FBI's *own* information. Ivan allowed himself a delirious giggle. He had really done it.

And now came the fun part—he couldn't say anything to anyone. He unlocked his apartment and went straight to the bathroom, transferring the intel to his secret computer and sending it to the circle. Then Ivan took a shower, pushed everything out of his mind, and turned on his phone to play music while he made dinner.

"Good evening," was the first thing he said to Mr. FBI. "I am sorry I am late."

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Alfred adjusted his glasses and squinted his eyes at the screen to hear better. " *Late* , my donkey! Where *were* you?"

Ivan was right there, at the stove, frying meat or something. He was wearing a different scarf than the one he had left with that morning, but Ivan changed his scarves regularly after showers. He looked clean and happy and wasn't covered in someone's blood or lugging giant bags of money like Alfred had begun to suspect. "I had to work late, and then I took the wrong train home. I hope you did not miss me."

Alfred slapped his desk. "Of course I missed you! You've been down for an hour! Location empty! No warning! Visuals gone...you could have dropped your phone in boiling pasta! You could have been murdering someone! Wait till the Chief hears about this…"

Ivan smiled that classic innocent smile directly at the camera. A water droplet slid off of one of his still-wet bangs. "I hope you will not report me over such a silly mistake."

Alfred froze. Lowered his voice. "You—You can't hear me, can you?"

"Soon my sisters will be here, and they will be very sad if I am not here to say hello with them." Ivan went back to prodding the meat with a fork.

“Well, come on. I wasn’t *actually* going to report you, you walnut,” Alfred jeered. “Duh.”

Ivan didn’t look back or respond. He was staring into his supper like it held all the secrets of the universe. Alfred fancied Ivan was troubled, which made him feel uneasy as well. Then Ivan slowly shook his head, and didn’t speak to his phone again for the rest of the night.

So Alfred just watched. Late into the night he hovered over the laptop screen, occasionally readjusting himself or taking a bite of the donuts someone had brought. The mood in Ivan’s house grew more and more somber by the hour. Alfred didn’t like the somber. It made him feel antsy and want to actually say something to Ivan, but he couldn’t right now, so he had to resign once more to boredom. Alfred texted his brother, played Fortnite mobile on his own phone, and right around the time when Ivan was in the bathroom getting ready for bed was when Alfred received a call.

He was dragged out of the game when his screen was replaced with the incoming contact. Alfred was confused at first, then delighted. He pressed answer. “Hey! What’s up?”

“Hello, Alfred,” said Kiku Honda. “It has been a while. Something strange happened to me today. Would you like to talk?”

Chapter End Notes

roulette - katy

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Disclaimer: I’ve never hacked the US government before, nor would I know of any way to do so. For the purpose of this story, though, it’s apparently pretty easy...um. Please don’t alert the authorities. ;)(;

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ivan breathed in through his nose. He breathed back out quickly, because boy it was hot and he had been walking through the city for what seemed like an eternity now and he was barely running on fumes of adrenaline left over from yesterday. He only had a day to do what he was about to do, clearing himself for the weekend. Also it was almost lunch and he was famished. Which led him to this idea.

"Bowl, please. Lo mein and orange chicken. No chopsticks."

"Oops, sorry," mused the man in the truck as he bustled about, securing his long, dark ponytail through the hole in the company-labeled baseball hat. He did not sound sorry. Then again, he was barely audible over the blasting of foreign rap music. "I already put in the chopsticks."

Ivan offered up a friendly smile. "Oh. That is okay!"

The man paused to stare Ivan down. Ivan stilled and returned the look. Yao Wang was menacing, he decided, but only because he moved so fast and talked so loud and, due to the height granted by the truck, was a few inches taller than Ivan. Yao squinted through the tinge of soy sauce hanging in the air. Ivan smiled wider. Yes, this was a man who didn't mess around. Just what he needed.

"What you smiling at me for," Yao sneered finally. "Throw them away if you don't want them. I don't give no crap. You owe seventeen thirty-five."

Ivan nodded. He slapped a few bills on the counter. "Keep the change."

Yao squinted at Ivan, squinted at the money, then did a double take. His eyes went as wide as the fake lanterns strung from the *Wok & Roll* ceiling. Then, in a flash, he scraped up the bills

and lowered both his brow and his voice. “This is way too much, you stupid. Even for tips. I never get tips.”

“Consider it a bonus for a favor,” Ivan said, carefully. Before Yao could move, he pulled a slender black case from out of his work bag and set it atop the counter. “You will keep this for the weekend, and you will meet me here next Monday and I will pick it up. You will not look at it, you will not let anyone see it, and you will forget who gave it to you. If I am not here next Monday, you will break it into small pieces and throw them into the river.” He smiled again, taking his bag of food. “Okay? I hope there is a fortune cookie in this.”

For a few drawn-out seconds, Yao looked absolutely disgusted as he stared at the case holding Ivan’s secret laptop. Then, he shut his mouth, and without blinking, stuffed the money in the register and swiped the laptop out of sight. He swallowed and met Ivan’s eyes evenly. “Of course there is a fortune cookie.”

Ivan smiled for real. “Great!”

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This time, Alfred had come somewhat prepared.

Ivan’s last phone usage: texting his sister at 7:03. Ivan’s morning shift end time: 11:30. Ivan’s current location: Constitution Gardens. Ivan was sitting in picnic fashion in the shade of a tree next to the pond, eating...what was that...Chinese? Eating Chinese, and wearing boots, overalls, and the scarf—what a fashion statement. He was alone, like normal, and blissfully unaware.

Alfred began his approach. He did this slowly, for he didn’t want to alarm Ivan, of course. He had moved fast across the city in order to keep this excursion within the allotted time of his lunch break, so he was sweaty, and also it was like a bajillion degrees Fahrenheit, which made the sweatiness *extra* Satanic, and Alfred was lil’ nervous, and he sweated when he was nervous. (Alfred did his best to deny the nerves on both the physical and mental scales. Nerves made people unsteady and uncomfortable, and when you were unsteady and uncomfortable you couldn’t function at the highest degrees of lyfe, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Much akin to, say, the government.)

How to introduce himself? Alfred considered a “Howdy, partner,” then a “Yo wassup,” then a “Greetings, Earthling,” and finally decided on “Oh, hey, it’s you again!” He cleared his throat to begin, and Ivan turned around at hearing the sound.

For a second neither of them spoke. Ivan perked up in surprise. Alfred turned his clearing-of-throat into a hacking cough. And then Ivan was saying “How did you find me?” at the same time Alfred started in with a weak “So, hi!” and it was basically a trainwreck.

They winced in unison, and then Ivan started doing his polite giggle laugh thing. Alfred rolled his eyes, not so glad anymore that he had decided to take off his sunglasses before approaching. They concealed an important part of his face that was bright red at the moment. “I meant to say ‘Oh, hey, it’s you again!’” he clarified flatly.

Ivan set his jaw. “And—how did you find me?”

Alfred put his hands into the pockets of his stupid FBI code-mandated pants and clenched them into fists. “Is ‘pleasantly stumbled upon you’ not a good answer or something?”

Apparently it was a decent enough answer, for it made Ivan smile brightly. “Maybe I found you! You didn’t walk by the Washington Monument again. I missed you. I decided to eat here instead.”

Alfred felt like a guilty bastard for knowing just how much Ivan *had* missed him, but was still a lil nervous. His eyes darted around and found the familiar food bag logo next to Ivan. “Hey, that’s Yao’s!”

Ivan looked down at his lo mein noodles as if noticing them for the first time. “Oh. Yes, I went by just a few minutes ago.” He smiled wider. “He was very nice. I gave him a tip.”

Alfred whistled. “Shoot, I never give him tips.” He cleared his throat again and gestured to the ground next to Ivan. “Um. Can I, uh, sit with you?”

Ivan paused and blinked, expression unchanging. Alfred was initially alarmed by this, and began to doubt if he had misjudged Ivan, until he realized that it was the face of a man about to make a sick reference. “Actually, *Meghan* , you can’t sit *anywhere* . You have—”

They were both on the ground laughing well before he even said “hemorrhoids.”

“I do like to eat in this place a lot,” Ivan admitted, waving at a cluster of birds who had ventured from the pond to check out the picnic food. “The ducks here can be nicer than the people. Not that you are not nice. I think you are...nice. You work near this place?”

Alfred leaned back on his hands and deftly dodged the bait. “It sure is beautiful here. One of my favorite places in DC, too. I mean, the monuments are cool and all, but I think a lot of people here can be not nice because they’re not really from here, cuz it’s tiny. Like, they just work here. Like politicians. Tourists.” He sat up. “Actually, in fact, where I work I’m like the only real American. Isn’t that weird? You know what, now that I think about it, that’s heckin’ weird.”

“I am from Russia.”

“Oh.” Alfred tried to react as if he didn’t already know this. “Um, interesting.”

“Is it weird to have Russians in Washington?” Ivan continued, gazing directly at Alfred, the clouds reflecting on his purple eyes.

It was another test. Alfred ignored a chill, the back of his mind wishing that the sun would come back and that they weren’t under a tree. “Well. Not really, I guess. Diplomats and stuff, right? I don’t—I don’t know.” He tried for a light laugh. “You’re not a spy or anything…are you?”

“No.”

“Oh,” Alfred deadpanned once more. “Interesting.”

Ivan scooted suddenly forward, breaking back into a grin. “You said that two times. That is suspicious. Maybe you are the spy.”

Alfred felt the chill crawl down his spine, and he put on a crazy grin of his own. He laughed. “I’m not a spy. I told you, *Ivan* . I’m a businessman!”

Ivan smirked, narrowing his eyes. “It is a lie and I do not believe you, *Alfred* . What if you’re not a businessman? What if you’re not even American? What *are* you?”

Alfred, in a semi-desperate attempt to make sure they were still both playfully joking, grabbed Ivan’s arm and wailed, “What are *we?* ”

They held each other’s gazes for a very tense second, until finally, the Russian leaned back. His grin fell lopsided into a small, disapproving frown. “That was not dank.”

Alfred threw his hands up, effectively letting go of Ivan and expressing himself at the same time. “Okay, fine. But no one says ‘dank’ out loud, you know.”

Ivan shook his head. “You have much to learn.” Then he turned around and began digging around in his work bag.

Alfred tried to look at anything but Ivan. The ducks, the scenery, the clouds. But he couldn’t believe his eyes. Ivan was pulling out his cell phone and turning it on. Alfred had never seen Ivan’s cell phone irl, and was instantly drawn to it. This was how he watched Ivan. He knew that back at headquarters, his empty cubicle was lighting up with the notification from his computer logging Ivan’s use of his phone.

“Here,” Ivan said. “This is my meme page. Follow me.”

“Whoa.” Now Alfred had it—a reason to follow Ivan other than the fact that he was paid to. But he couldn’t follow Ivan either way, because then Ivan would be alerted to Alfred’s profile, which was hidden, and a big no-no. So he said, “Um, I don’t have that media.”

He subsequently felt bad, for Ivan’s face fell. “But I want to have some way of contacting you other than your lunch break times. My sisters are visiting for the weekend, so I will not see you.”

And speaking of lunch break, Alfred’s was near finished. *Damn, I have to actually get* lunch *, too!* “Uh...okay. Um. Why don’t we open up your fortune cookie, first, and see what it says.”

Ivan was justly perplexed as he turned to look back at his food bag. “Okay…”

Just like before, they broke open the waxy wafer together. “ *You will soon receive unexpected help from an unexpected source, aru,* ” Alfred read aloud. “And our numbers are...wait. This looks wrong.”

“What?” Ivan peered in to see.

Alfred whisked the tiny slip of paper away. “No. I’ve got this.” He opened his jacket and pulled out an FBI code-mandated pen. “Let’s fix this.”

Ivan continued to watch on in confusion as Alfred hunched over to scribble on the paper. “What are you doing?” He leaned closer. “What are the words on that pen?”

“Nothing,” Alfred muttered. He clicked the pen away and folded the paper back up. “Hold out your hand.”

Ivan hesitantly did so. His hand was soft and cold; Alfred plopped the paper on his palm, then curled Ivan’s fingers around it. Then he stood up. “Open when you’re ready.”

Ivan was already tearing into the slip. His eyes crossed over the “magic numbers” twice and flashed back up to Alfred. “This is a phone number.”

Alfred shrugged, putting his sunglasses back on. It was a feat to keep his grin subdued.

“Who is this phone number?” Ivan questioned, growing impatient.

“Idk. Guess you’ll have to text it and find out.”

“No.” Ivan was frowning. “Tell me who this is.”

Alfred fell into a squat, laughing. “Take a chill pill, dude. It’s *mine* , okay? But—I’m not supposed to use my phone for this, so keep it on the down-low.” He winked. Then he remembered Ivan couldn’t see him winking behind the shades, so he awkwardly reached out and patted Ivan on the shoulder, his hand just barely grazing Ivan’s scarf. It was impossibly smooth and cottony.

And Ivan’s frown done did turn upside down. “Oh! Okay!”

“Okay?” Alfred stood up again. “Okay. Cool. That’s…that’s cool, then? Uh. I gotta go.”

“Thank you,” Ivan said with so much sincerity it made Alfred pause. “I hope we can talk more very soon.”

“Yeah, man. I mean—uh—yeah. Definitely.” Alfred nodded. “See ya.”

He wasn’t wearing a huge navy windbreaker emblazoned with a huge yellow “FBI” on the back, but he still felt Ivan’s eyes on him when he turned. Something about that guy… Alfred liked him. What was wrong with them sharing phone numbers anyway? It wasn’t like Ivan was actually a threat. Of course not. Definitely. Well, he was a tad creepy and all, but Alfred still liked him. Alfred just had to keep his cover in check, because pretending he didn’t

already know the guy was turning out to be difficult. Ivan was already catching on. But this was just research. Yes. That's what it was. Now Alfred could get to know Ivan *better* , on a different level.

Kiku had warned him of this.

Alfred and Kiku had had a nice conversation the night before, in which Kiku described his day at work and Alfred described his. Kiku was one of Alfred's best friends, so he knew Alfred worked in the FBI; he just didn't know about the black division. Kiku had told Alfred about how strange people at the museums were, and described an awkward incident in the elevator and computer room. Alfred had said he would be glad to check it out, if only he weren't so busy already with an "ongoing assignment" (Alfred had been having "ongoing assignments" for years now). Kiku had sighed and said he understood, but that Alfred bargained too much. Alfred had said I don't know what you're talking about. Kiku had said to forget about it, and yes, we should get together sometime and play games, and it would be a good distraction. Alfred had said from what? Kiku had said, well, from our busy work lives, I suppose; I could be wrong and I mean this in the lightest of ways, but I have noticed you seem slightly...absorbed. Alfred had said uhhhhhhhh yeah, okay, *right* , yeah, *duh* , that sounds awesome, my dude, we should totally hang out. Kiku had said good. Great. Alfred had said goodbye.

And now, walking down the street on a hot summer day, looking for a train to take, Alfred realized he didn't know how far he would go with the Ivan thing. Nor did he know what he would do if he discovered Ivan actually *was* a spy. If Ivan was found out, Alfred would have to do...his *job* …

He strolled into headquarters fifteen minutes late with Starbucks. What he saw out front, however, made him decide to quicken his pace. "Is that…?" A tall Ford F-150 with a set of lights stuck on top. Alfred gulped and dashed through security.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon," he mumbled to himself, jamming the button in the elevator. He could have done his laundry in the time it took to reach the negative two-hundredth floor. He wished someone would install a fire pole already—or even better—a slide. Just as expected, when Alfred finally arrived at the bottom, the gray division was in chaos.

" *A lead!* " Elizabeta Héderváry and Ludwig Beilschmidt were practically jumping up and down, waving a paper around. Arthur Kirkland stood to the side, looking like he wanted to

join in, but finding it too inelegant to do so. And standing next to *him* was none other than renowned District of Columbia police chief Matthew Williams. Alfred's bro.

"Matt!" Alfred exclaimed, setting his Starbucks down on the nearest table and jogging over.

"Al!" Matthew called, lifting a hand in greeting. Matt had lived his early life in Canada when their parents had divorced, but went to college in the States and decided to work there, too. Their parents had remained partners in business, so Alfred and Matthew had stayed close.

"You," Arthur grumbled as he watched Alfred approach.

"What's cooking?" Alfred asked, glancing around after giving Matthew a classic bro-hug.

"You'll never guess," Matthew informed excitedly in the familiar slight accent Alfred loved to make fun of. His voice was quieter than everyone else's. "Last night someone called in as a witness to the disappearance of Francis Bonnefoy, the most recent disappearance from Chief Héderváry's gray division." When Arthur nodded, he continued. "We have a sketch of what we think could be a suspect, and a brief description. And thanks to the investigative work done here"—he gestured to Ludwig's and Héderváry's party—"we'll be interviewing the very man tomorrow."

"Oh." Alfred had long since lost interest in the drama going down in the gray division, and had to admit he wasn't caught up. "That's great, man. You really know how to do your job. You go, Glen Coco. You go and you catch that Mafia."

Matthew adjusted his glasses. "Well, it isn't proven there's a connection with the Mafia just yet. So far it's only speculation—"

"Gilbert's coming home!" Chief Héderváry sang, punching the air. "Finally. What a weak."

Arthur picked up again. "It's just like Francis to let a bunch of Italians distract him, too. When he gets back, I'm going to kick his arse. But first, I need to speak with *you* ." He

pointed at Alfred, and it wasn't a happy, I'm-proud-of-you sort of point.

" *Me?* " On instinct Alfred feigned stupidity and pointed at himself.

Matthew sighed, sensed their short conversation was coming to a close, and said quieter, "Yes, *you* . Anyway, good to see ya! I hope your work is going well. Sorry to—"

"Oh, it's great!" informed Alfred. "It's just—"

"He'll have a lot to say about his work indeed." Arthur began to march, probably with the suggestion that Alfred should follow. "Very glad you could be with us, Matthew. I'm looking forward to—"

"It's just *fine* ," Alfred finished with a big smile. "In fact, it's more than fine. It's dank."

Matthew was left looking confused and a little put-out as Alfred was dragged away. Alfred was about to complain to Arthur about this, about ruining the reunion, until he saw where they were headed: Alfred's cubicle. Inside of it, Alfred's laptop was already up and running.

"How'd you…" Alfred trailed off. "The log."

Arthur about near exploded. "Yes, the log, you idiot! Do you have any idea what a position you've put us in? Two unreported suspicious instances, two days in a row!"

Oh, great. Nothing filled Alfred's stomach better than dread. He rushed to defend himself. "Hey, Ivan told me he was working late! And his sisters are coming over soon, so I assumed he could have been, like, calling them or something!"

The Chief crossed his arms, trying to maintain a deadly calm. "He 'told you?'"

Alfred put a hand over his eyes in a subtle attempt to conceal the blush. “He— *god* —he does this thing—”

“And his *sisters* are coming over? Alfred F. Jones! While that may not be directly suspicious, it’s still a potentially major event and needs to be reported!”

“Why? It’s just a family visit! Do I have to write down every time he takes a piss, too?”

But Kirkland was cross. “You can discern what’s important and what’s not, Agent. Or at least I *hope* you can. Do we have to have Toris cover for you again?”

They both glanced over to Toris. “Please no,” he muttered.

“When will you learn?” Arthur went on. “When will you learn—”

“That my actions have consequences, I know, I know.” Alfred crossed his own arms. For a fleeting second, he considered telling Arthur about the luncheons and the phone number exchange. He really did. He opened his mouth, ready for the information to just fall out like it normally did, but then nothing happened. He tried again. Maybe Arthur would be proud he was taking an initiative. Nothing. It would be so easy. *I’ve talked to Ivan, and he’s not as scary as he seems.* Zilch. Kirkland was still staring at him.

“You best be on your guard, boy,” Kirkland dictated. “Tonight. I want you to report *everything* that happens, no matter how minuscule, or I’m going to sit here and watch over your shoulder. It’s almost treason.”

“Alright, *fine* ,” Alfred grumbled, the dread balling up his throat and spilling out. “But just so you know, he calls me ‘Mr. FBI.’”

.

The house was clean. The laptop was gone. The sunflower was watered. The meme account was bustling. But Ivan needed to do one more thing before his sisters arrived.

He climbed into bed, opened up his cell phone, and plugged in the number. He prepared to type.

Good evening, Alfred. (°3°)

Sent. He stared at the screen and waited one minute. Two. Three.

Read at 10:44 PM.

Chapter End Notes

toxic - britney

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Wow lol that was ominous. And yes I really should be doing homework but here I am woohoo yay. I'm also very impressed with myself for keeping this secure weekly update schedule, and it's thanks to all the support from you guys! So keep it comin' and stay tuned, because next chapter's got something a little different and very special planned...

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

the gray division

So far, escape plans A through E had failed.

“And I do tell you—F will be our best performance yet!” Francis declared, posing in a look he thought was confident, desperately trying to ignore the chainlinks wrapped tightly around his waist and arms, holding him to the chair—for if he acknowledged the chains, he also acknowledged that they hindered his confidence. It wasn’t a kink.

“As long as Antonio can keep his thicc ass awake enough to go through with it,” Gilbert grumbled, hunching forward in his own set of chains like a disgruntled gargoyle. There was an itch on his nose that he would have killed to scratch. His wrists were already rubbed red.

“Wh...what?” Antonio yawned. He had been caught in the act, and immediately straightened up as much as he could in the chains when he saw the dead gaze Francis and Gilbert were giving him. “Oh. Heh. What can I say? It is siesta time!” He paused. “I think.”

Francis nodded towards Gilbert, his unwashed blond coiffure plopping sadly onto his shoulder. “What day is it, again?”

Gilbert scrunched up his brow in intense concentration. “Well, judging from the angle of the lightbulb light onto the linoleum and the smell of your breath, I would estimate roughly that I have absolutely no idea.”

After a beat of silence (silence didn’t survive for long when these three were together) Antonio perked up. “We can just wait until he comes back with food and maybe he will tell us! Or maybe he will not, probably not, but we can judge from the course of meal!”

“ *Non* , you forget; that is when we must escape!” Francis tilted his gorgeous head back at Antonio in pity. “It is obvious you think he has the—how you say—the *sexy* , my friend.”

“Whatever it is,” Gilbert jeered to both of them, “he sure has a lot of it. But let’s focus on getting out of this dump first. Ya think they have cameras by those old refrigerators? *Nein* , more important: ya think they have *beer* ?”

Before any of them could offer up an answer, logic-based or not, the door slammed open. A dark shadow appeared in the threshold. The three prisoners immediately flinched back. Antonio whimpered.

“You shithead assbutt *failures* of FBI better shut *up* the *fuckeroni* ,” the figure warned, “ *or I will gag you with a zucchini!* ”

.

Agent Ludwig Beilschmidt was an FBI officer for all the right reasons: his university grades were top-notch, he was self-confident, he had three dogs, and he had never been in love. He just *knew* he was the one that would defeat the Mafia and save Gilbert and Francis and Antonio but most importantly Gilbert—he *had* to be. However, the journey to do as such would put all of Ludwig and all of his reasonings to the test.

The day Feliciano Vargas was brought into the local police station was a real scorcher. Hotter than the last, even, and it bothered Ludwig’s German climate-tempered body, but not Feliciano’s. The man wore a cute polo shirt, bright red shorts, and a carefree smile that he occasionally turned at Ludwig in a villainous attempt to make Ludwig feel hotter. Feliciano didn’t seem to be anxious that he was one warrant away from handcuffs, but then again, he didn’t know the extent of the information Ludwig and Chief Elizabeta Héderváry had piled on him. He *had* met Ludwig before, when Ludwig had eventually approached him at his little produce market corner store, but was seemingly oblivious about just how long Ludwig had been watching him. “Wow, the weather feels just like home!” he was saying, spinning around before they opened the doors. “I do not want to go inside!” Ludwig’s eye twitched. However on-edge he was now, though, was nothing compared to how perturbed he would become.

Chief Héderváry held open the door for them and began sly casual small talk—the foreplay of the interview. “You come from Italy, right?”

Feliciano nodded vehemently, that one little sienna curl of his bouncing. “Yes! I moved in college, and—wait, do I need a lawyer to talk?”

They entered the interview room and took their seats, Ludwig and Feliciano on one side of the small table and Héderváry on the other. “Not if you don’t want one,” she informed him. “You are not under arrest.” *Not yet* , Ludwig thought.

“Oh, good,” the Italian sighed. “I can’t afford one.”

Ludwig and Héderváry made awkward eye contact at that statement. *Are you gonna tell him or…*

“Do I also have the, ‘the right to remain silent?’” Feliciano inquired.

Ludwig turned to him. “You can always choose to remain—”

“Because I will probably not use it,” he continued with a simper. “I am not very good at staying quiet. I get told this a lot.”

Héderváry cleared her throat. “Well, glad that’s established. Easier for us, I suppose. So, Feliciano, will you tell us more about yourself? Specifically”—she leaned forward suddenly —“ *exactly* where you were last Tuesday morning?”

Feliciano blinked. “Um.” He glanced at Ludwig for help. “Ludwig, was Tuesday the day you came?”

“Yes,” Ludwig answered on instinct. Then he shook his head wildly. Feliciano wasn’t supposed to know Ludwig had been spying on him on Tuesday. Communicating with him had been so much easier when Ludwig would just watch and didn’t have to talk. “ *Nein* —I mean, *No* —I mean—”

Feliciano raised his eyebrows somewhat... *playfully* . “Oh, really? Wow, I thought it was Wednesday!”

Ludwig blinked this time. “Um. It *was* Wednesday. That is what I meant to say. Not Tuesday.”

“Hm. Well, then, I think that on Tuesday morning I was at home at my apartment,” Feliciano clarified. “I work in the afternoon, you know? So I like to sleep late. I like to sleep. I *love* to sleep.” He was grinning at Ludwig, all handsome and proud of himself, and Ludwig finally looked away in shame.

Héderváry nodded. She already knew all about Feliciano’s whereabouts due to Ludwig’s ‘expert’ reporting skills. “I understand you sell local produce at your market.”

“Yes! Blueberries and tomatoes and watermelons sometimes and zucchini and strawberries and cucumber and peaches—I like peaches—and corn—there is *so* much corn in America!—and potatoes and tomatoes and onion and—”

“That’s great, honey, that is quite a lot.” Héderváry was writing quickly on a clipboard held out of view. This could have been a fake distraction and intimidation tactic, but for all they knew she was drafting a grocery list based on Feliciano’s speech. “Please continue to describe your morning.”

Ludwig knew this: once you got over the annoying part, Feliciano’s voice was quite mesmerizing. The pleasantness of his lips could have been a trap, but whatever the case, Ludwig found himself watching and listening contently as he often did, as Feliciano described how he had had brunch that Tuesday. The letting-down of Ludwig’s guard would soon become a major mistake.

“...And I had the tomatoes in a bag but then I found out one got squashed so we had to divide up the recipe and I could not figure out the math—”

“‘We?’” Héderváry interrupted without missing a beat. “Who is ‘we?’”

Feliciano stared blankly. “What? Oh, I mean just me. I live alone. So far. *Anyway* , I am pretty good at math if I try hard but I do not like to try hard for most things so I looked around for a calculator and when I was looking under the desk I hit my head on the chair and it hurt so very bad, very bad, and I ran to the freezer to get something cold to put on it and then I saw that in the freezer there was meat! And I forgot I had meat and so I said to myself maybe I should put meat in the recipe too so I can grow strong like you, Ludwig!” This was when Feliciano turned to Ludwig, and when Ludwig felt something touch his leg under the table. Confused, Ludwig looked at Feliciano. He was waving his left hand around in the air, gesticulating to nothing in particular, but Ludwig could not see his right hand. Which meant…

He gulped. This was it. Feliciano blabbered on, but his hand was still resting there. On Ludwig’s thigh.

The effect was instantaneous. Ludwig sat up like his spine had been replaced with a wooden board. He cleared his throat but didn’t move or speak or look anywhere except directly at the wall over the Chief’s head. No one noticed his ears grow a humiliating shade of pink. Feliciano’s hand was *warm.* And it was still there. *Touching him.* Over his dress pants, but *touching him.* Just *resting* there like it was nothing; like it belonged there. What if Ludwig had to cough or itch? Or say something? How was he supposed to move?

“...so I took out the meat and put it on my head, and soon I felt better and I could do math! And I did the math and then the meat started getting very warm and…”

How dare the stupid Italian just continue on completely unfazed? What if he had simply mistaken Ludwig’s leg for his chair armrest? Did these chairs have armrests? Ludwig had forgotten and at this point was too afraid to check. What if Feliciano *moved* ? What would Ludwig do then? He tried to ignore it, tried to keep listening and be professional and not think about the twisting in his stomach.

“...it was *benissimo!* ”

Héderváry had abandoned note-taking. She looked incredibly bored. “So. You are saying you could not have been at the scene of the crime because you were busy making lunch.”

“Yes!”

Then she began to smile as sweet and sly as Feliciano, almost as if she pitied him. “Cute story, bro, but you realize that this is not sufficient evidence for an alibi.”

Feliciano’s lips fell to a frown. “What? No, I said I gave up and just borrowed a tomato from my neighbor! She saw me!” He turned to Ludwig again, and the pressure on Ludwig’s thigh grew just small enough for it to not matter but just large enough for Ludwig to notice. “The pretty lady was not listening?”

“I. I thought I remember you said y-you were short a tomato.” Ludwig made sure not to look at him.

“Yes, so I borrowed one when I realized my math was wrong!” Feliciano finally, *finally*, let Ludwig go by throwing both his hands in the air in the most distress he had shown yet. He pouted. “Did anyone listen?”

The Chief rubbed her eyes. “Well, luckily, we don’t have to.” She gave a firm pat to the recording box on the table. “So now, let’s get to the real evidence. I will repeat to you the story.”

As Feliciano recovered, Ludwig glanced quickly at their seats. There were no armrests. He silenced his mind and tried to refocus.

“It was discovered that early Tuesday morning, sometime between twelve and six—or five and seven if we want to be realistic about Francis’s schedule—an individual was possibly abducted in the Downtown area on his way to work. We have no evidence but the individual’s failure to arrive at work, his subsequent failure to arrive *anywhere* , a possible connection with other disappearances around town related to the individual, and now, one witness testimony.” Héderváry reached into her bag and extracted a file folder. She and Ludwig had poured their hearts into this. It looked so thin and stupid now when Feliciano was here staring at it with his wide, beautiful eyes. She opened it, and a few informative sheets of paper slid out, along with the police sketch. “The witness describes hearing sounds of a struggle from an alleyway, and a minute later seeing a darkly-dressed young man dash

around the corner holding a weapon of some sort in his right hand. This man is confirmed by description to not be the victim. The witness remained unseen but heard a squeal of nearby tires on pavement, prompting them to move away from the scene for fear of their own safety. They describe all of this happening at around just before six o'clock in the morning, at a time when you claim you were asleep. We do not know what happened after. The—"

But Feliciano was still staring at the file. More specifically, the sketch. He tilted his head and asked abruptly, "That drawing is supposed to be *me* ?"

Ludwig, frustrated, snatched up the portrait. "Er, yes. It was done by witness description by an artist at the police station."

Feliciano let loose a peal of laughter. "It looks nothing like me!"

Ludwig grumbled to himself in indignation. With Feliciano right here, sure, it was easier to point out the mistakes in the likeness. Although the sketch was good and did resemble him, there were differences, namely the shading of the hair, the eyes, and the tightness in the jaw. Not to mention the absolutely murderous expression that Ludwig doubted would flatter Feliciano Vargas. The man in the sketch looked older, and more like a relative of Feliciano than Feliciano. Perhaps...a brother.

"And I would never wear black, especially in the morning," the Italian commented with a dismissive wave. "Black is out. Do you have a pencil and paper I could borrow? I can prove this is not me."

Héderváry and Ludwig glanced at each other. Ludwig wasn't sure what to do until something passed over the Chief's expression and she smoothed it over with calm decisiveness. "Of course," she mused, offering Feliciano items from her bag to use. "Here, sweetie."

"Thank you!" Feliciano smiled at her and swiped the paper across the table to rest in front of him, next to the police sketch. He stared at it for a second before picking up the pencil. Ludwig understood as Feliciano began to trace an outline—he was using his left hand. The police report and witness testimony specifically stated that the criminal had held the weapon with his right.

Slowly, Ludwig's stomach began to settle. He became more and more assured with every stoke of the pencil Feliciano made on the paper. He knew Feliciano was a phenomenal artist; back during the few weeks he had watched Feliciano through his phone, he had seen some of the pictures Feliciano had taken of his art. Now, watching live as Feliciano highlighted every difference between his self-portrait and the police sketch—Ludwig hadn't even *noticed* that the curly parts of their hair were on opposite sides—it became more and more obvious that Feliciano wasn't the culprit. Or he was just doing a good job of making them look like fools. Ludwig wasn't sure what to believe anymore.

"Do you like?" Feliciano said when done, holding up his paper. It was just as quick and rough as the police sketch, but was as accurate to Feliciano as a real photograph.

"Wow. How much time do you spend looking in mirrors?" Héderváry giggled, taking the two papers to study them closely. "You know, police sketches are never *perfect* …"

"And what do *you* think, Ludwig?" Feliciano asked, bumping his head against Ludwig's shoulder like a cat begging for affection.

Ludwig would have been lying to himself if he said he didn't have some affection for Feliciano at this point, but that was supposed to mean nothing. Feliciano was a suspected criminal who had Ludwig squirming in his seat. Ludwig wanted to move this along faster and be done. He felt like Feliciano was humiliating all their work and research. "I agree with Chief Héderváry," he stated, cold and calculated. "Police sketches are not perfect, but the one we have looks close enough to you to remain relevant. So, now, tell me." He met Feliciano's eyes without blushing and shirking away this time. "What do you know about the Italian Mafia?"

"Agent Beilschmidt, let's leave the questions to me," Héderváry chided, but Ludwig was fired up. Feliciano's face had gone white.

"Have you any connection with the organization?" Ludwig pressed, leaning forward. "Why did you *really* come to Washington?"

"Beilschmidt, this isn't—"

“I told you already,” Feliciano responded. He was looking down, refusing to meet Ludwig’s gaze. “I came for college. I would never be in the—the Mafia, even back in Italy. I would never want to hurt anyone.”

“And what about your family, hm?” Ludwig narrowed his eyes. “Your grandfather and brother? Back in Italy? Are *they* in the Mafia?”

Feliciano’s head shot back up, his eyes meeting Ludwig’s in a flash. “How do you know I have a grandpa and brother? I did not tell you this!”

“Enough.” Héderváry slammed a hand on the table. The conversation halted instantly. “This has gone from amusing sexual tension to blatant and ridiculous prejudice. We’re not getting anywhere. I want to research more before we waste the rest of this man’s day.” She gestured at Feliciano. “See if his alibi stands. After all, Officer Williams did remind us that the Mafia thing was all speculation.”

“But Gilbert…” Ludwig mumbled, at a sudden loss.

Feliciano scooted back in his chair, creating a loud squeak noise across the floor. “Does this mean we are done?”

Héderváry crossed her arms. “No. You’re not off the hook. Of course you’re aware by now that monitoring you was and is Ludwig’s purpose; I’d like to have Ludwig keep visiting you, Feliciano.” She didn’t mention anything about the broken phone.

Feliciano strangely didn’t acknowledge what he had thought Ludwig’s “purpose” was. He didn’t say anything. His expression was, for once, unreadable, and it made Ludwig highly concerned. Until Feliciano replaced it with his usual bright smile and chirped out an “Okay!” This made Ludwig even more concerned.

“Okay?” Héderváry smiled back, standing to gather her things. “This investigation is far from over, but for now, yes, we are done.” She gave Feliciano’s self-portrait one last bewildered glance. “And by the way, thanks for this.”

Everyone stood. The two shook hands in a quite chummy fashion for an interrogation, and then Feliciano and Ludwig shook hands. Feliciano had a limp fish sort of handshake, but Ludwig didn't want to let go out of awkward determination. "We will get to the bottom of this," he said, trying to keep up a menacing, yet professional tone.

Feliciano snatched his hand back and had the audacity to do his cute little giggle-grin thing. "Don't worry! I am sure everything will come out on top!"

Ludwig closed down his embarrassment and opened the room's door. "You are free to go, for now."

Inside Agent Ludwig Beilschmidt's head there was chaos. The stupid Italian wouldn't stop sending out mixed signals—why? Why did Feliciano do this? Why did he sit here looking so good and sweet and touch people's legs under tables and talk for fifteen minutes about the excruciating process of last week's lunch while being interviewed for a possible connection with one of the most infamous criminal organizations in the world? And why did Ludwig deep down want so badly for him to be innocent?

Gray division Chief Elizabeta Héderváry knew why. She shook her head to herself and walked out of the room, following the others, but beginning to question her own place. She and Ludwig couldn't run the gray division themselves for forever, and the more Gilbert, Francis and Antonio were gone, the more she felt herself doubtful that they would come back. She didn't even want to think about whatever shit was going down in the black division.

Feliciano Vargas, as often, tried to stay happy and positive. Just before leaving, he turned to Ludwig and gave his complete absolute most sincerest of winks. "I can't wait to see you again!"

.

"I can't wait to get rid of you!" Lovino Vargas screamed, halfway across the city in a rotting cellar to three chained-up idiots. He had had enough of this, but was in too deep to quit now. They were FBI, though they didn't act like it.

“I just wanted to know what time it is,” Antonio whimpered. “So we could escape.”

“You weren’t supposed to tell him that!” Gilbert whispered, as if Lovino couldn’t hear him. “Remember the plan!”

“Ah, yes, the plan!” Antonio sat up and put on a fake smile. “Mr. Vargas, it is really dirty in here, and we were wondering if you could let Gilbert loose to clean up a little, and we promise he won’t do anythin—”

“Oh, save it.” Vargas held up a hand that couldn’t be bothered.

“ *Non, non, non!* ” Francis hissed, leaning forward to reach Antonio’s ear. “You were supposed to seduce him first, Toni!”

Lovino glared, his hands on his hips. “As if. There will be no seducing here, you perverts. At least not while it’s so dirty.”

Antonio was stressed. “And, and *that* is why you should let Gilbert *clean!* ”

Lovino stared at him. “Guess what? *No!* ”

The three FBI agents sat back in their chairs, defeated. Francis sighed dramatically. “At least give me a shower, then. *Douche* .”

Lovino wheeled on him, insulted. “Not with that attitude! Watch your mouth, you fucking bastard child of a baguette.”

“Can we just have our food, then?” Gilbert whined. “The food is the only good thing about being locked up with no memory or reason why I got here. Still the last thing I remember is

getting my arm stuck in the bowling ball return, and frankly, that is not a very manly memory."

"No it is not," Francis ruminated.

"Shut up, you *douche* ."

Lovino's frown turned into a snarl. "Oh yeah? It is just as bad for you as it is for me, assholes! Having to deal with *you* . *Ugh* . I am starting to wonder why I go along with this whole scheme."

Antonio, in a moment of divine realization, tried to pry more information out of that distracted philosophical statement. "And...why is that?"

Their eyes met. "Because life is stupid, dipcunt!" Vargas sassed. "Now close your dumb mouth and eat your dumb spaghetti!"

Antonio looked sad. "But I cannot eat with a closed mouth."

Lovino looked into the camera like he was on *The Office* .

Chapter End Notes

paparazzi - gaga

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AIGHT Y'ALL THERE'S THE RUB WOOO DO WE HAVE ANY THEORIES YET? BECAUSE I'M ACTUALLY PLOTTING OUT SOME THINGS NOW YAYy hah fun

ALSO VERY IMPORTANT BECAUSE HERE'S SOMETHING WE DO HAVE: ART! YES THAT'S RIGHT FOLKS, YOU HEARD ME, WE HAVE ART, TRUE AND VALID!

VISIT MY TUMBLR PAGE, rebels-advocate, TO SEE THE WONDERFUL GLORIOUS FABULOUS DRAWINGS BY derevosky (derevoskymusor on tumblr) AND marine-wvs (on tumblr)! GIVE THEM LOTS OF LOVE!

Still reeling from this guys I'm so happy you're all here. I would not have made it near this far without you and we're still on chapter 6 lol.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was eight AM Saturday morn and Alfred was alive. His phone battery, however, was close to death.

Alfred: ok i've got another one for u Ivan ok here it is

Alfred: are u there

Alfred: plz this is urgent

Alfred: Ivann

Alfred: raviolis are pop tarts. change my mind.

Ivan: Alfred that is been done before, also NO

Alfred: YES

Ivan: NO

Alfred: ACCEPT IT

Ivan: I ACCEPT IT ONLY IF YOU ACCEPT THAT MY SIDEBLOG FOR KNITTING IS GOOD AND HAS REVOLUTIONARY CONTENT

Alfred: i'll accept it but i still won't read it

Ivan: ;)(;

Alfred: hah get it cuz i can't read

Ivan: lollolkolkololol)

Ivan: i have question though are u really 19

Oh, shit.

Alfred: um i'm 23

Bad idea telling him? Maybe. But of course it didn't matter if Ivan knew the truth or not. Maybe.

Ivan: oh ok

Alfred: oh¿

Alfred: well how old r u

(Ivan was 25.)

Ivan: 25

Alfred: wow so u really are a grandpa

Ivan: ┻┻┻ ヽ(`Д´)ノ┻┻┻

Ivan: i should have never shown u the knitting blog

Alfred: no really i swear i think its cute

Alfred: i don't have a fancy emoji tho so here ;)

Ivan: ;)

Ivan: oops i have to go my sisters flight is landing

Ivan: but thx i think u are cute too (^ ▽ ^)

Alfred knew that, at least. He snorted to himself and typed out a last response before rolling over on the couch and shutting his phone off.

Alfred: hasta la vista

For a few minutes, he just stared at the ceiling, reliving their conversation. He could have been working, watching Ivan, but he was finding he liked talking to Ivan more.

Alfred had not told Arthur about his meetings with Ivan in the parks. Alfred had not told Arthur about the texting. Alfred *had* told Arthur about Ivan's recent "suspicious activity," washing over the "Mr. FBI" thing by explaining Ivan's meme obsession. Arthur had crossed his arms, went on a brief spiel about how the Internet was corrupting everyone and everything, told Alfred to log it on the file, and walked away. Alfred had logged it on the file. Then Alfred had opened up his phone, read the text, and began talking to Ivan. They hadn't stopped.

The TV continued to play *Black Panther* , but it was the twenty-ninth time Alfred had seen it already. He redirected his attention to the ceiling, sighed for a second, and then opened his phone back up, ignoring the low battery warning. He dialed a number.

"Hey, yo, what's up, Matt! So how's that gray division interview coming?"

.

Washington, D.C., even on a Saturday morning— *especially* on a Saturday morning—was bustling. Ivan's sisters had *wanted* to look around, though; it was still four in the afternoon to them, so look around they did, after dropping their stuff off at Ivan's apartment. He could never say no to his sisters.

It was charmingly evident Yekaterina and Natalya had gone all out. They both wore sunglasses, held disposable cameras, and carried fanny packs. Natalya, standing on Ivan's left, kept itching at the jacket she had forgotten to take off and unconsciously stepping closer to him whenever someone passed them by. Yekaterina, doused in sunscreen on Ivan's right, had her nose in some brochure and kept walking into things as she struggled to understand the English. They were sandwiched together in a neoclassic wind tunnel of people and voices and cameras; they were hot, tired, hungry, and waiting for the jet lag to kick in. Ivan could not be happier.

"He's smaller than I thought he would be," remarked Natalya after some silence and staring.

"He looks bored. You could almost climb up and sit on his lap!" exclaimed Katya, snapping a picture.

“If you did that they might lock you up and enshrine *you* in a temple forever,” Ivan teased. “I have also heard that there’s a secret cave basement below.”

They all looked down at the marble beneath their feet.

“Wow,” mused Natalya. “I thought the secret was that he came alive at night.”

Ivan nodded solemnly. “That too.”

“Let’s all take a picture with him!” Yekaterina declared, pulling her siblings in. She turned the camera backwards, adjusting it in multiple ways to get the angle correct. The flash blinded them. Ivan laughed.

“Oh, oh!” Katya lowered the camera and gazed out past it, along the aquamarine reflecting pool stretching endlessly before them, and up the ever-present Washington Monument pointing up in the distance. “We need a picture in front of all that, too!”

They stepped back out into the open, the sun hitting them with a blast. “I can’t imagine what it must feel like under that scarf, Ivan,” commented Natalya. “Katya said she was surprised you still wear it. Are you hot? I think saw a cold water vendor somewhere around here.”

“I’m very well,” Ivan responded. “I feel the best I’ve felt in a long time.”

She looked up at him, her expression pleased. She silently linked their arms together.

“Everyone come over here and smile!” Their older sister stood ahead on the gray concrete plain between the Memorial and the Reflecting Pool. She had somehow found and communicated with another tourist to take their picture, and was waving her arms around.

Ivan had taken pictures of himself near most of DC’s attractions before, but he felt more comfortable now when his sisters were standing in the photos with him instead of looking at

his own lonely photos through a screen halfway across the world. More complete. He had the sudden urge to latch onto his sisters and never let them fly back home.

“Let me breathe! You’re sweaty!” Yekaterina laughed, squirming in the hug Ivan had wrapped his sisters in.

“ *I’m* not sweaty; *you’re* sweaty, *sweaty!* ” Ivan responded, kissing her on the cheek.

The tourist’s English interrupted them. He held up the camera. “Um. Do you want this back?”

“Yes! Thank you!” Katya grabbed it from him, and then they all crowded around to inspect the photo.

“We look silly,” Natalya declared. “I blinked. Let’s do it again.”

“Well, there are plenty of other things to take pictures of,” Ivan put in. “Perhaps we should keep walking.”

And so they strolled in fashion down the National Mall. It was like the weight was lifted off his shoulders—getting this free staycation. The computer was gone, he had even taken off work, and he didn’t have to think about Alfred all the damn time because now he could just text him! Ivan blasted a thought to Mr. FBI: *I hope you’re just as happy as I am right now, wherever you are.*

Then, some deep, dark thought crawled its way up from the shady corners of Ivan’s brain. If something... *did* happen between he and Alfred...what would his sisters say? Ivan glanced the tiniest glance at them. Yekaterina was using the brochure to shield her eyes from the sun. Natalya was squinting into the long reflecting pool. As children the three had been raised in a plethora of different Eastern European countries, but they loved each other, so maybe it was okay Ivan thought Alfred was hella funny and hot and so *American* and—and—oh no! It was almost lunchtime and they were right on the lip of the Constitution Gardens! What if ALfred was *there* ?

Natalya interrupted his thoughts. “Do you think anyone has ever drowned in this?”

Ivan took her hand. “Um, probably not. It’s not deep, but you aren’t supposed to go in it. Come; let’s take a picture up there.”

“I want to just touch the water, then,” she decided, letting go of him. “Just to touch it.”

Yekaterina laughed. “Ooh, I want to, too!” They both sat down on the edge of the pool.

Ivan tensed up, looking around. Alfred could be any one of the men in suits. Or—maybe he didn’t work on Saturdays. Maybe he was wearing casual clothes. He put a hand over his forehead and scrutinized the closest pedestrians. Then Ivan checked the time again on his phone, and then again. *Please, Mr. FBI. If you can hear me, please don’t let Alfred see us yet.*

Aw, frickin’ frick. Now Ivan was *praying* to Mr. FBI. *You’ve officially made me LoSE MY MARBLES!*

“Ivan?” Yekaterina looked up. Half her arm was submerged in the water. “It’s okay! No one’s going to arrest us!”

“Be careful or you’ll fall in and drown,” Natalya warned Katya, climbing back to her feet.

Ivan shook his head at them, feigning embarrassment. “You are two grown women.”

Yekaterina linked her wet arm with him and sang, “Two grown women on *vacation!* ”

There he laughed for real, and some of the anxiety faded away. They continued walking down the length of the pool. Ivan didn’t let himself give one more glance towards the gardens until they had reached the end and taken another few selfies with the pond and skyline in the background.

Katya consulted her brochure when Natalya had deemed the pictures worthy enough and had stopped telling her to *Delete it!* “So in front of us now is the World War II Memorial, right? It’s pretty!”

“And we have to walk all the way around to get to it,” confirmed Ivan.

“My feet hurt already,” groaned Natalya.

And yet, they spent a good hour circling the memorial. It was one of Ivan’s favorite monuments in Washington, mainly for the architecture and unique layout. On a sunny, happy day like this, it was easier to live in the present and feel the weight of the distance between now and bygone eras. He imagined the memorial oval was a sports arena and the world was okay.

From World War II, they made their way back to 1776 by ascending the hill near the Washington Monument—DC’s ever-distinctive yet ever-disrepaired obelisk. It was closed, but they walked the circle of American flags anyway.

“It’s almost dinnertime,” Natalya mused with a calm yawn. A few small clouds had moved in, giving them blissful seconds of shade.

“ *Lunchtime* ,” Ivan corrected. “Do you want to go home and come back, or eat out? There are lots of food trucks.” He thought briefly of Wang Yao and tried to keep from shuddering.

“Let’s finish walking the Mall first, then decide,” Yekaterina suggested over her shoulder, snapping a few photos of the city. “Or at least look through one museum. Soon we will be too tired!”

So they strolled down the hill and crossed over to the street. The SAVE THE WHALES people were out again, spread over the grass with their signs and stickers. “So that’s why the blocks in between are so empty,” commented Natalya.

Ivan shrugged. “It’s free real estate.”

Katya was smiling. “Should we go donate? I like the whales!”

“Last time they were here they talked at me for twenty minutes and almost made me late for work,” Ivan responded, tucking his chin into his scarf.

“So no,” Natalya clarified. “What about the Smithsonian, Ivan? I have heard of that. Should we go in?” She was pointing at a building up ahead to their left, past the crowds.

Ivan was about to correct her by asking “Which Smithsonian? There are more than one…” before he understood the particular Smithsonian she was pointing at. The National Museum of Natural History. The one he had hacked into just a week before.

“That’s the wrong one,” Ivan blurted out. He surprised himself. He wasn’t used to spitting lies so quickly to his sisters. The police hadn’t showed up on his doorstep yet, but Ivan still wanted to allow more time to pass since his infiltration. He wanted that man in the elevator to forget he existed. To pass everything off as a regular maintenance check. Nothing was wrong. So Ivan thought fast. “You must mean the Smithsonian *Castle* , Natalya. It’s this way.” He pointed south in the exact opposite direction of the Museum of Natural History. “And there are also gardens there that I help maintain!”

Yekaterina shaded her eyes again. “We’ll have to pass the whale people, then.”

“They aren’t so bad, actually.” Ivan led the way, suppressing a shiver.

Many hours, flowers, and promotional stickers that turned out to be magnets later, the three made it back to Ivan’s apartment. Natalya and Yekaterina were beginning to tire, so they worked on unpacking their things and blowing up the air mattress while Ivan cooked. He turned music on, but every time he glanced at his phone he thought of texting Alfred. He posted to his meme account instead. His follower count had stayed at one million.

After dinner he and his sisters broke out the vodka and watched some old movies Yekaterina had brought over, all cuddled up on the air mattress together in front of the TV—which was just Natalya's laptop propped up on a chair. It was a strange feeling to be completely relaxed and lowkey anxious at the same time. Ivan wanted to tell his sisters about Alfred because they were the closest friends he had, but he also didn't, because they had just gotten here, and they were falling asleep all over the place, and what would they say anyway? Ivan wanted to drown in a sea of memories with them and talk about their childhood back home, and ask them questions about their lives now, but he didn't want to bombard them on their first day. He wanted to say so much; he said nothing.

Thirty minutes into the second movie, Yekaterina rolled over and touched his arm. Natalya was sleeping like the dead. "Hey, Ivan?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think it would be okay...well...Natalya and I were talking on the plane. I—I know we told you we'd be here for the weekend, but neither of us has to work, and…" —she giggled softly— "we were wondering if maybe we could stay a bit longer? Today was very fun."

Ivan breathed in and out. "Of course you can stay," he assured her. "As long as you want, please. Two days is not a lot of time."

Her smile was illuminated by the light of the movie. "Mm, thank you. We have missed you very much, Ivan. It seems like you have a wonderful home here. Goodnight!"

As she rolled over, Ivan leaned back. Hacker circle aside, Ivan did like his home here. He took another sip of vodka. Then he rose and tucked his sisters in, just like Katya used to do, and like they both used to do for Natalya. The house was filled with the sounds of their snoring. It felt good. He watered the sunflower before preparing himself for bed as well.

.

Alfred had just slid into his Deadpool pajamas when his phone went off. He hopped across his bedroom, dodging the empty tub of Ben & Jerry's he had just consumed, to see the text. Ivan had been quiet all afternoon.

Ivan: long day ;) how are you?

Alfred: gr9. readin fanfic (i can really read i swear) u?

Ivan: sisters and i walked around washington dc today. Why does names of everything have "freedom" in it?

Alfred: 'MERICA

Alfred: well, see, we like freedom!!!

Ivan: adorable (´ω`*)*

Ivan: question what else do you like

Alfred: ...is this a trap dude i like many things

Ivan: do u like me

Oh, shit. Jeez, Ivan was direct! Yet Alfred couldn't stop himself from typing back immediately.

Alfred: ok confession time i do like you

Ivan: i like u too (◡‿◡✿)

Alfred was blushing over text. Shit shit shit shit shit. But it was, like, good shit. Shit in a good way. Shiiiiit.

Ivan: want to facetime?

Alfred: i'm in bed rn

Ivan: so want to facetime?

Alfred: heck, sure ;)

Shit.

Chapter End Notes

send me a picture - gwen

.

I would have had this done last night, but last week was a particular beast of a busy bee. Woo boi. Still recovering. But anyway today there's the Emancipation Day celebration in DC so yaaay!!! (Also the lingo sounds different in this chapter because they're speaking Russian or one of their own languages with each other obviously, not English.)

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ivan: it's difficult

Alfred: just blow air idk use your teeth

Ivan: my tongue hurts

Alfred: my tongue would hurt too if i deep-throated it every time i say the letter L. russian is weird

Ivan: ;(english is weird

Alfred: i mean yeah lol

Alfred: maybe u should ask my boss he's ACTUALLY english and he says his TH sound all proper. I just know that in spanish it's weirder

Ivan: send another video plz (:ДՀ)

Alfred: ok one sec

Alfred: i can't actually picture u saying this to someone though i just

Alfred: sent

Ivan grinned, turned the volume down just in case his sisters had woken up already, and pressed play. It was 2:30 AM and he was trying to learn how to pronounce the word “thot” correctly. In the video, Alfred was slumped over in his bed with a double chin, comic character pajamas, messy hair, and no glasses.

Ivan: has anyone ever told you that you are beautiful ♡

Alfred: ...

Alfred: ...

Alfred: nah they usually tell me i look like shalissa ♡

Ivan: ALFRED!!!!!!!!

.

Alfred was not that familiar with flirting, or dating, or anything romantic, really. He had visions sometimes of a happy life with someone he loved, but his past relationships hadn’t lasted more than a couple months, and he moved through fads and obsessions faster than what was probably necessary for his emotional health. Interacting with Ivan—albeit over text—instilled both fear and excitement into him, which had taken some getting used to. Therefore, Alfred had decided to call in a wingman to help advise him, distract him from his stress, and save him from a weekend of boredom, which was how it came to pass that Kiku Honda was sitting on Alfred’s couch in a robe on a Sunday morning, holding a game controller in one hand and a thermos of tea he had brought over in the other.

(Interestingly enough, Alfred and Kiku *had* dated for a while when they had attended college together. Also interesting was the fact that it was probably, like, against the law for Alfred to date Ivan. Alfred knew the whole situation was a major mess, but in the morning decided that, oops! It was too late to do anything about it now.)

“They’re behind you,” warned Kiku, dancing his spaceship out of the way on the TV screen.

“Shit. I thought we lost them.” Alfred’s ship narrowly dodged an alien blast-ray. “The little buggers came back for more.”

“Do we take the north or east wormhole?” Kiku questioned, tapping his thumb over the control buttons like he did when he was frustrated. “I have forgot. It has been too long.”

“Try the north. I’ll hold them off your back.”

“You have taken too much damage already!”

“Then, man, I will die a hero’s death.”

They were playing *STARSCRAPERZ!* , the video game they had designed in college. It was their second attempt. They had both perished in the first wave of their first attempt.

Kiku blew a short breath out of his nose which Alfred recognized as laughter. Then he inhaled sharply. “Alfred, the north wormhole leads right back to the green nebula! We have already collected the stars there!”

Alfred cursed again. “Oh, worm!”

“What?”

“Quick! Go back and try the right one— *ah!* Whelp. I’m dead.”

Alfred's half of the screen went blank, and the wacky electronic beats they had installed as a musical backdrop intensified. Kiku frowned in determination and set his tea down on the coffee table, clutching the controller with both hands. "Do you remember where the aliens spawn next?"

The object of *STARSCRAPERZ!* was to teleport yourself via wormhole throughout different-colored nebulas in space to "collect stars." The more stars you collected, the more firepower you had to defeat the evil aliens that would spawn in waves and hunt you down. Winning a level would boost your popularity as a starfighter back at the Academy base, and thus allow you to purchase better ships and weapons. It was basically interstellar *Pacman* with an *Ender's Game* -esque twist.

"They'll come out of the blue nebula and attack from the right." Alfred wiped at a smudge on his glasses. "Just hang in there. I'll help. You've got this. You're going to save the world. You're going to save all of us."

"Or I will die trying." Kiku soared into the purple nebula and started gathering more stars. Alfred watched on in intense concentration. There were probably thirty seconds left before the buggers found him.

Sure enough, a squadron of attackers entered from the east wormhole. Luckily, Kiku had already finished gathering enough stars. "Here is where fate will be decided," he whispered, trundling forward to meet the aliens head-on.

"GO!" Alfred yelled, pumping his fist.

Kiku dodged the first blast, but took a hit point on the second. He returned fire of his own and knocked out the offender while Alfred screamed on and threw pillows in the background. "How close am I to death?"

Alfred checked Kiku's health bar. It was...despairingly low. "Oh. Yolo, dude."

Kiku exhaled. He was *really* frustrated, now. He didn't say anything, just kept blasting. He managed to take out four more of the aliens before misplacing his movements and getting

eliminated by a rogue blast. Alfred shrieked and collapsed in agony.

Kiku set the controller down with grace. “At least we are getting back used to it.”

Alfred lifted his head out of a pillow. “Wanna try again?”

“Maybe later. I admit I am surprised at the ingenuity we had.” Kiku took another sip of tea and then hugged a pillow of his own.

“Wish I had that motivation now,” Alfred agreed, staring at the ceiling.

There was a quiet pause. Then, sensing the mood, Kiku asked, “Does your work not motivate you?”

Alfred heaved a huge sigh. “I mean, yeah, it does. Yeah. But I still feel...restless. Especially lately.”

“...You still want to go to NASA? I remember you used to want—”

“I guess. And I also like the thought of being a cop like Matt, or doing more field agent work, or travel, or acting, or gardening, or making more video games, or even selling shady junk in a truck on the road like Yao Wang. At my job now all I do is sit and listen and—well, I can’t really tell you.”

Kiku pondered for a second, then, in a perfect therapist’s voice said, “Tell me more about Ivan, please.” Alfred’s heart skipped a beat. “You said he’s Russian and you met him through work, correct?”

“Oh. Yeah. Yeah, he’s...yeah.” Alfred was at a sudden loss for words, which didn’t happen often, especially not when he *wanted* to use them. “We’ve been talkin’.”

Kiku looked slightly uncomfortable, as if he didn't want to press for more, but felt the need to in order to help Alfred. "And you do like him?"

"Yeah. And he likes me too, so that's good." He laughed lightly. "We're going to go out for lunch tomorrow. It's, like, a date."

"The FBI allows you to do this?"

Alfred laughed again. Nervously, this time. *Let's play a game called How Much I Can Give Away Without Committing Treason* . "Well, actually, he's not FBI. Um. It's complicated."

"I agree," stated Kiku. "But if you do like him and you know he likes you, why are you so worried?"

Alfred didn't answer. He buried his face in a pillow and waited for Kiku to connect the dots, which was probably selfish, but whatever. It was screwed anyway.

With polite caution, Kiku asked, "What is Ivan's job? FBI-related, I assume?" No answer. "Is he a police officer or forensic scientist or politician or…"

"He's an immigrant gardener."

"I am confused. You said you met him through work?"

Alfred nodded. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the TV screen. It said *GAME OVER* .

Kiku took another sip of tea. He was processing, Alfred knew. The room went quiet for a second, the rumble of the AC and the video music fading behind the clamor of thought exchange within their heads. Finally, Alfred blurted out, "I'm just worried about what will

happen if I start to like him more and more. Because eventually I'm going to have to tell my team and explain the time we've been spending together and it won't be good."

Kiku nodded slowly. Was he understanding? His composed expression didn't give anything away. "How long do you have to tell them?"

Alfred fell back against the couch. "I've already failed to report some of our meetings. They don't know we text. And Ivan—oh hell." He dug his hands into his hair. "Ivan has no idea. I'll never be able to tell Ivan. God, this is such a huge trainwreck and I *know* it's a huge trainwreck and I still have no idea what to do!"

Kiku lightly touched his arm. Finally, Alfred looked over. "Do you know for certain that if you continue seeing him you will like him more and more?"

Alfred gulped. He hadn't thought that far into the future yet. His present-time mentality was probably what had gotten him into this sticky situation in the first place. "Maybe."

Kiku put his tea down and put his hands together like a detective. Dust captured in the morning light glimmered off the sleeves of his robe. "So. You really like Ivan, but you cannot tell the FBI. You are in the FBI, but you cannot tell Ivan. Ivan is part of your FBI work, and you cannot tell anyone. You are closing yourself off on all sides of your life and have thus become restless and anxious."

Alfred nodded decisively. "'Bout right, doc. And all that's before even mentioning the memes or the mafia."

Kiku seemed vexed for a second, but shook his head and pressed on. "Have you told this to anyone else yet? Your brother, perhaps?"

"Um." When they had talked yesterday, Alfred had kind of ignored Matthew's concerned questions by pretending to be distracted by his movie. "No."

“Then this is what I suggest. You should either end your engagement with Ivan now, or tell someone what has been happening. I suggest the latter. I know I would be fired instantly if I withheld information from my superiors.”

That was not a very happy dichotomy. Alfred didn’t like it. There had to be a third option better than doing nothing and letting the whole situation descend into chaos. “What if I just kidnap Ivan, fake our deaths, and move to Alaska?”

The corner of Kiku’s mouth perked up just the slightest, and then straightened itself out again. “I do not think that sounds like a good plan.”

Alfred chucked his pillow to the floor. “You’re right. I could never live as a humble fisherman in an igloo. It would be cold and we would need electricity and WiFi. Hmm. What about Puerto Rico? Oh, wait.”

Kiku finished off his tea peacefully. “Do you need more time to think?”

Sassy. “Thanks for listening, man.” Alfred fidgeted again, once more at a loss for what to say. The AC had gone off. He was hungry. He probably needed to check his phone for another text from Ivan. “I’ll…I’ll come up with of something. Just...promise you won’t tell anyone.” Alfred still couldn’t detect if Kiku had understood the implications that Ivan was Alfred’s subject, and was unsure if he needed to say something else to assure the man that everything would be okay.

Kiku nodded sagely. “I am glad you trust me.”

“Right now, you’re about the only person I can trust,” he retorted. Alfred still had no idea what to do. He didn’t want to end what he had with Ivan premature, and he didn’t want to tell Arthur, for then he *knew* it would be over. Alfred was past the point of pretending to be scoping out Ivan for research purposes only. Besides—Ivan was innocent! So really, there was nothing wrong with seeing him. He could just tell.

“You have lots of people you can trust,” Kiku assured him. “You are good enough to be in a federal intelligence agency. Trust yourself.”

Alfred was touched. If only Kiku knew. He wished so badly that he *could* tell Kiku. That he could tell Kirkland, that he could tell Ivan, that he could get Ivan's name off that darned list somehow. He had long since forgotten why Ivan was on the list anyway. It was all prejudice and speculation, he assumed. Mr. FBI would know better. It had only been a week but everything was moving too fast and Alfred was sick of secrets.

He remembered the fortune cookie from a lifetime ago. Instead of acting as a foreboding reminder, however, the thing only distracted him by making him think of food and want to eat. Alfred was, like, perpetually hungry. His breakfast of champions had been a bowl of soggy Fruit Loops and bad coffee. "Wanna have lunch?" he interjected. "I can grill us some cheese."

Kiku stared at him for a second, then nodded once more. He was so cute when he was agreeing to food. "Well, if you don't mind. And...would you happen to have any tea?"

"That was about it, I think. I'll listen to any tea *you* want to spill now, though."

"What?"

"Oh. You meant—oh, no, I hate tea. Sorry. That shit goes in the harbor."

"Of course."

They ate lunch on the couch over a classic Mario Kart tournament, having decided that they would master *STARSCRAPERS!* again later. (Alfred won narrowly due to a cleverly-used blue shell in Coconut Mall.) Kiku wanted revenge, so they moved on to other games, digging deep into Alfred's stockpile and developing headaches by the time the afternoon sun began to press at the windows. But Alfred was feeling pretty good. He had successfully avoided checking his phone and thinking about work for at least four hours. By the time they finally got around to *STARSCRAPERZ!* , he was relaxed and optimistic once more.

He and Kiku started off on a good note, staying in the same nebula to gather stars instead of splitting up like they had done before. That way, they could survive the first wave without batting an eye.

“And if the second wave comes from the blue nebula, then we must get the stars there first and move on to the others one by one,” suggested Kiku.

Alfred shook his controller determinedly. “Good plan. Then when we’re done *we* can come to *them* .”

“But we have to move fast.” They finished up in the blue nebula and soared into the purple. Collecting stars went much faster when they worked together, but it did mean less firepower for each of them. The second wave of aliens caught up with them in the red nebula.

“I’ll take ‘em on bottom, you get the top,” Alfred commanded, driving his ship forward.

“...Let’s finish this,” agreed Kiku. He fired the first shot.

Alfred took some heavy hits at first, but was able to clear off five attackers in less than a minute. Kiku had to backtrack to avoid blasts, but managed to kill off the aliens before he was cornered. They whooped loudly as the LEVEL COMPLETE! screen flashed before them.

“Man, we’re geniuses,” Alfred declared, high-fiving his friend just a little too excitedly. “Third wave, who? Let’s do this.”

They lost to the the third wave within two minutes.

“Maybe we should practice more,” Kiku said, carefully setting his controller down. “I *am* getting used to it. May I take the game home?”

Alfred stood up and stretched. “Yeah, yeah, dude. That was a blast. I’m pumped. Bet you’ll have it mastered by tomorrow. Might be easier on singleplayer?”

“I don’t know,” Kiku admitted. “I will have a lot of work when Monday comes. A bug was discovered on one of our computers on Friday, and some strange security footage, as well. One of the indoor cameras was broken. They want me to fix it.”

Alfred touched his toes. “Oh, crap. That does sound weird. Bet it was that creepy elevator guy you were talking about.” He laughed.

Kiku shook his head as he popped the game disc from the console. “No, I am sure he was a maintenance worker. Cameras malfunction all the time. It will just be difficult to fix the bug.”

“Well, good luck. I’ll swing by if I can.” Alfred did a single jumping jack. “Are you leaving?”

“Yes, I have to feed my cat. Thank you for today, Alfred, and for lunch.” Kiku gathered his things, which were only his empty thermos and car keys. He still wore his robe and his polite, passive, yet calculated expression. “I also wish you the best of luck. I know I am not in your position, but whoever Ivan is, I hope he is kind and understanding, and things will turn out okay.”

“Me too,” Alfred sighed. “Thanks, man.” He paused. “Wanna hug?”

“I suppose.” Kiku carefully clasped his hands behind Alfred’s back and leaned in. Alfred wasn’t too much of a touchy-feely guy, and had once yelled out of surprise when Francis, the MIA Frenchman on the gray division, had tried to give him the double cheek kisses in greeting, but hugs and snuggles from people he cared about felt very good. Absently, he wondered what a hug from Ivan would feel like. Probably great, considering how soft his hair and skin looked and how tall he was and maybe he was cold but they could be warm together as long as Ivan kept those bright yellow dirty garden gloves out of the picture...Alfred felt stupid.

He waved Kiku goodbye from the apartment building's elevators. And so his friend disappeared into the city.

For a second, Alfred stood alone in the hall, all the energy suddenly sucked out of him now that Kiku was gone. He leaned against the wall, thinking for a second. Then he walked back to his number, walked back into his bedroom, picked up his phone, and texted Ivan.

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Yekaterina and Natalya had just begun making dinner when Ivan's phone buzzed with a message. He set down his sunflower's watering can to read it.

Alfred: what's cookin good lookin?

A yell from the kitchen. "Ivan! Get off your phone and come chop the carrots!"

Ivan: katya's beet soup special (°-°) are we still on for tomorrow?

Alfred's texting bubble popped up a few times and then went away. Ivan got scared for a second, wondering what was taking him so long to respond. He clicked his phone off and entered the kitche to be quickly assaulted by old, familiar smells. He set his phone in front of him while chopping the carrots. Alfred finally texted back within three minutes.

Alfred: where did u wanna go?

Ivan breathed a sigh of relief. He could have just said 'yes.'

Ivan: anywhere u want ;)

“Who are you texting?” Natalya rounded the counter and tried to peer over the knife to see Ivan’s phone. He quickly turned it off.

“My boss. I am making sure I am off work this week.” A smooth reply. Ivan turned away to toss the carrots in the pot.

Alfred: no u choose something cuz i would suggest mcdank’s

Ivan: what

Alfred: u know...

Alfred: mickey d’s

Alfred: mcdick’s

Ivan: we are not eating there

Alfred: maccas

Alfred: mcdo

Alfred: golden arches

Ivan: (>_<) stop this

“Are you done with the knife, Ivan? I need it.”

Alfred: then wherrr

Ivan: what about a picnic? in the same place as friday?

Alfred: oh i like that. and takeout? Like yao’s?

“Ivan! Can you wash off the cutting board?”

Ivan: how about we each bring food for us to eat instead

Ivan: i can bring you some of katya’s soup

Alfred: interesting

“Where do you keep the large spoons, Ivan? I can’t find them.”

Alfred: no clue what i’ll make but i like this idea

Ivan: XD

Ivan: it is a date

“IVAN!”

Chapter End Notes

e.t. - katy

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This is filler-y and vacuum-packed with foreshadowing more horrible than in A Quiet Place (saw it last night and wow I adore the premise), I know, but it'll kick into gear next chapter. Writing their little texting chats is my guilty pleasure.

FANART ALERT!! EVERYONE: derevosky (derevoskymusor on tumblr) HAS DRAWN FRANNY AND GIL FROM CHAPTER 6, AND MY WHAT AN ABSOLUTE ICON. GO SEE IT NOW LIVE. YOU WON'T WANNA MISS.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chief Arthur Kirkland's shadow loomed over Alfred and his tiny cubicle. "Anywhere else?"

Alfred flipped through the log he had been instructed to keep. He had done all the weekend from memory at one o'clock that Monday morning, so his notes were appropriately vague and sloppy. "Yeah, just a sec. Wait, no. No; on Sunday they stayed at Braginsky's apartment. They were still there this morning when I logged on, and are still there now."

Kirkland jotted something down. "Good. What are his sisters like? You did watch them, I presume?"

Alfred had not watched Ivan's sisters, but it was good he and Ivan had talked anyway, for he had gleaned enough about them to pretend he had. "The older one—Yekaterina, but they call her Katya for short—is silly, nice, and kinda simple. The younger one, Natalya, is a lot more serious and high-maintenance. From what I observed, none of them really seemed suspicious, and none of their interactions with Ivan were suspicious." The more he dealt in half-truths and white lies, the easier it became. Like fibbing to a teacher.

"Brilliant. Just one more question, then." Arthur tucked the clipboard under his arms and crossed them. "Does Braginsky still... *talk* to his phone like you described? 'Mr. FBI?'"

Alfred was barely able to mask the blush behind his glasses. "Not—not that much anymore." His first truth of the day. The more Ivan was talking to Alfred, the less Ivan was talking to Mr. FBI. "I think the meme is dead."

Kirkland nodded slowly, as if he understood perfectly. Alfred almost laughed. "Right. Okay. Well, then. It seems you're being competent."

"I try." Alfred grinned loudly.

But Arthur appeared too weary to take any of it from anyone at the moment. He looked away and sighed, his shoulders slumping. “I’m just glad someone around here other than me is sticking to a solid plan.” He leaned away. “No, I didn’t mean you, Toris, sorry, Toris.” He leaned back. “It’s been a rough weekend. The gray division seems to think that throwing Beilschmidt—Ludwig—into the belly of the beast is a good idea. Of course, because monitoring someone in person will be *so* much easier and *definitely* doesn’t hold the potential to compromise the whole mission.” He was ranting sarcasm to himself at this point, not even looking at Alfred but at some shape seemingly hovering over his left shoulder, which was how Alfred understood just how bad it was. “No disrespect to Ms. Chief Hédervári, of course.”

Alfred kicked back and propped his hands over his head. His and Ludwig’s situations were similar. “So, he’s, like, living with the Mafia now? Is that even, like, legal if y’all don’t know if the Mafia is really the Mafia?”

Kirkland straightened up. “It’s legal.”

Alfred squinted. “ *I* took AP Gov. Amendment...three.”

Kirkland slouched again. “Okay, well, technically this entire division force operates under...special terms.”

“Huh.” Alfred rolled his eyes and turned around in his chair. “Can’t argue with that.” Something had reminded him of something, and now he wanted this interrogation to be over so he could focus on it.

“Sometimes I question why I’m even here,” Arthur admitted darkly to unlistening ears after the passing of a few silent seconds. “Could you imagine...if the public actually knew...but no mind. It is all for necessary protection. Or so they tell us. Good day, Alfred. Keep...doing what you’re doing.”

“K,” Alfred mumbled, already pulling out his computer. Ivan was online. The second the Chief left, he pulled up a visual. But he didn’t intend to watch for long.

Ivan's thumbs were flying as he typed, and Alfred didn't need to access the screen visual to know Ivan was texting *him* . In the background, the Russian's apartment swam in a lukewarm light; the kitchen window curtains were pulled taut over the insistent morning sun, and the stovelight gleamed onto the sunflower on the sill. Ivan's sisters were probably still asleep, so he was sneaking out of the house to prepare for their date. Noon wasn't for another hour and a half, though. So why…

Ivan's screen went blank. He had turned his phone off. And then, right on cue, Alfred's own phone buzzed. Ivan's text flashed over the lock screen.

Good morning!! ;) i can not wait to see u ❤

Alfred didn't open it, but covered his mouth with his hand so his goofy grin wasn't visible. Ivan had used a fucking heart emoji.

He set his phone face-down on his desk and wheeled over in his wheely chair to the stack of file cabinets below a photo of Times Square he had taken eons ago. The cabinets weren't overflowing. Ivan's file was the only one Alfred ever used, and he even had to blow cobwebs from it.

Under MISDEMEANORS there was just a single sentence. Just one line of text keeping Ivan condemned and Alfred employed. The words came back to Alfred as he scanned them again: "Purchased black market laptop and malware-loaded access cable from known illegal circle of tech distributors, transaction confirmed by their records when exposed." Dated approximately ago.

And for all the time Ivan spent alone, for all the time Alfred had watched him spend alone, Alfred had never seen this laptop once. He laughed to himself. What did the FBI think they were doing?

.

Ivan had realized, to some dismay, that so far Alfred had only seen him in his gardener uniform. He stared down at his legs and arms, pitifully pale, a little chubby, and tinged pink from spending most of Saturday under the sun. An anticlimactic glo-up from the overalls and gloves, perhaps, but nonetheless, the dress shirt and khakis were much cooler, even under the shade of the tree in the Constitutional Gardens. His scarf was freshly washed.

Natalya and Yekaterina had taken a day for themselves to recuperate. Ivan had left them a post-it note with a list of all the public pools and spas he knew of (or could find on Google Maps). They planned to meet up to go out for dinner later, but for now, Ivan had the day to himself. They...didn't know about the date. He had told them he was going to get groceries and gifts, which wasn't really a lie; next to him on the picnic blanket was a recycled tote bag full of fruits and vegetables he had picked from a local market that morning. It also contained the soup from last night he meant to give to Alfred. After this, Ivan only had one last errand to run. He was really developing his skills at multitasking and keeping secrets!

All grievances were blurred over by his mind when he saw Alfred making his way across the park toward him, however. The man was wearing his typical black uniform pants paired with a light blue button-up short-sleeved shirt. As always, he looked professional, but walked and talked casual. In his hands was a large square Tupperware, the contents of which were undeterminable. Ivan perked up and waved.

"Alrighty, so. Minor issue," began Alfred as he plopped down on the blanket, kicking his feet out to the side and dumping his workbag behind him. He whipped off his shades, placed the Tupperware between he and Ivan, and stared at it with disdain.

Ivan scooted closer and smiled. "How are you?"

Alfred looked up, and a sliver of sun glinting off his glasses flashed Ivan in the eyes. "Me? Mighty fine. Dandy. But my nachos... *no son buenos* ."

But this was Ivan's first authentic American date and he wasn't going to let it be sullied by pessimism. He blinked slowly. He couldn't discern the state of the nachos through the Tupperware lid. "Um. I am sure your food is very good! Can I see?"

"At first I didn't know what to make for you, since I'm not really *that* huge of a cook except for holidays and the Super Bowl and stuff," Alfred explained, popping the lid off. "So I went

with something kinda fast. I put chicken and olives and pico in it and stuff, but then I realized I'd have to keep it all. So I tried to heat it back up this morning, but the office microwave made the cheese all wonky and probably gave me cancer. For some reason I thought that maybe the sun out here would help it stay hot, and that obviously didn't happen. So here." He gestured to the contents of the messy plastic tub. "Have some gross cold nachos."

Ivan examined the dish. It didn't look *too* horrible. It was colorful and smelled pleasant. The most obvious problem was that the presentation was all over the place, and Alfred had visibly not brought along a fork. This was another food Americans ate with their hands. "More like Hurricane tortilla."

Alfred snorted loud enough to cause a few of the nearby ducks to flee, but— *was that* —he was blushing! Ivan held back the urge to point it out for fear Alfred would stop. Instead, he turned and extracted his own food from the grocery bag.

"Well, I have also brought something cold, so you are not alone," he said, digging around for a spoon. "This is Katya's borscht. Last night it was very good. Very good. Very...great." Ivan nodded to stress the point.

Alfred took the spoon tentatively, his gaze leaving Ivan to examine the meal. "It's supposed to be cold? Huh. I can't remember if I've had borscht before. I only eat beets at Thanksgiving."

"You have not had Katya's before," Ivan teased. "I will get her recipe and make it for you again if you like it."

"In that case, let's dig in," Alfred grinned, dripping liquid from the spoon as he toasted, though it looked more like a salute. He truly was adorable.

Ivan tested the waters with one nacho, scooping up a heap of cheese and tomato. He was pleasantly surprised at the taste, having expecting it to be soggy and sad. The toppings were still lukewarm, and the parts of the chip that weren't so saturated were salty and crisp. And spicy. The spiciness was unexpected. Ivan crunched, swallowed, and reached for his water bottle.

“Hey, this *is* good!” Alfred blurted out, quickly grabbing another spoonful.

“I told you.” Ivan shifted, carefully matching his sitting posture with Alfred’s. It was magical how being with Alfred made the rest of the world fade away. On this blanket, under this tree, in this heat, surrounded by a bustling world capital, Ivan felt completely at ease.

“The way to my heart is through food, and you, sir, have the map.” Alfred was waxing poetic. “That may have made no sense, but whatever. Hey—how are the gross cold nachos?”

Ivan had just been about to eat another one. “Oh, yes. They are not bad as you said. I would enjoy you making more warm ones.” Would a wink be a good addition to the statement? Ivan winked.

Alfred laughed and threw a hand into the air. “Oh, thank goodness. You better not be lying. I need to prove I’m not as bad of a cook as my boss. He once—”

“The ‘fire you’ boss? The English one?” Ivan tried not to look too eager to be hearing this fresh news about Alfred’s elusive job.

“Yeah. One time a couple months ago he brought scones or something—maybe it was muffins—into work for some special occasion, and this French guy had to leave sick. It was hilarious. He pretended to barf in this lady’s recycling bin and this other guy got, like, offended. They were all shouting at each other and then I tried to start a Nerf gun war. That didn’t go well.”

Ivan put his hand over his mouth to stifle his giggles. “That is wild—with a Y. If that happened at my old job in Russia, they would start a true war.”

“Haha, damn. Where did you work?”

“A florist.” He crunched his nacho. “It was a...critical business.”

To Ivan's glee (and confusion), Alfred laughed again. He rolled over onto his back and stared up at the leaf-threaded sky. "Oh my God, of course. That makes so much sense. I can see how it would fit you."

Ivan could never tell him how much he missed it. Since they were on the topic, and Alfred was quite reposed, he decided to return the question. "And what about you? If we are on a date to know each other I have to know what 'business' you work." After a millisecond he added, "So you can take more lunch breaks."

"Right." Ivan studied Alfred's face closely. It wasn't grinning anymore, just smiling. He wanted Alfred to look him in the eyes. Alfred kept staring the sky. "Well, I work at NASA."

"What?" Ivan was taken very off-guard by that. He had expected Alfred to say he was a prized, secret artifact collector in a museum, or the head of some wealthy private corporation, or a gambling casino boss, or even, admittedly, a politician. He couldn't stop his mouth from spitting out, "You work at NASA? Then—why don't you have a cool Facebook, or Snapchat? Everyone who works at NASA puts cool stuff on social media."

"Facebook is dead, Ivan."

Ivan shook his head and waved his hand swiftly. "Ah, I know, I know. It was a test. But you work at NASA? So do you get to see rockets? Do you do math and build computers?" He gasped and covered his mouth again. "Alfred. Are you...are you...are you an *astronaut?* Do you getting to go *into space* ?"

Alfred flopped over onto his stomach and propped his head up with his hands, his cheeks smushing the smile in his eyes. "You're literally the cutest thing ever. But no. I'm just...tech support, I guess. So far."

Ivan felt a warmth grow in his chest and had the urge to touch his scarf. He had finally said it out loud in the real. *Cute.* "When you go to space will you take me?"

“Well, heck yeah.” He pounded a dedicated fist against the picnic blanket. “Have to have at least one witness present when we find out if the Earth is really flat or not. It ain’t true until you see it for yourself.”

Ivan nodded. “And the stars cannot be seen in the city. I would love that.” He didn’t realize he was whispering.

And then, Alfred didn’t say anything in return. He just smiled.

They stayed like that for a few glorious moments, just staring at each other and smiling. Ivan looked back at the nachos when the pounding of his heart became unbearable. He wondered if Alfred felt the same; he heard the spoon click against the borscht container. Ivan knew that if he truly wanted to be intimate with Alfred, he would have to make some major life changes. Namely, the fact that he was a poor immigrant gardner, and also, of course, a Russian spy. And he wasn’t sure if he could do that yet. He knew he was still in debt. But he also knew that right here, right now, he was beginning to want Alfred more than he had when texting him that morning.

Ivan ate another nacho. A small breeze blew threw the park, toying with the leaves and ruffling the ducks’ feathers. He wondered if it was possible to hate himself and love someone else at the same time.

“Do you like movies?” Alfred asked out of the blue. Ivan looked up and was flattered to find he had finished the soup and was now sitting up. There was red juice on the side of his mouth.

“I do like movies,” Ivan replied eagerly. Was Alfred going to propose something? “My sisters and I watched a lot of movies last weekend.”

“I was sorta thinking, um, if we wanted to do this again. I may be too busy to actually go somewhere this week, but if you have a computer or laptop, we could, like, FaceTime and watch together.”

Ivan told the tensed muscles inside him to calm down. “I do not have a computer,” he stressed. “Would it not be much easier to see a movie together? But you would need to come to my house because I can’t leave my sisters.”

Alfred’s eyes flickered to his shoes. “Ah, right; I’m stupid. I wouldn’t want to, er, intrude on you and your sisters. You’re probably very busy too right now anyways.”

Ivan despised that ambiguous statement, but let it slide. Alfred had shown an interest in another date, which was the important part. He squeezed his scarf. There was still red juice on the side of Alfred’s mouth. “When does your lunch break end today, Alfred?”

He snorted. “About seven minutes ago.”

“Oh.”

“It’s chill.” Alfred tucked his legs beneath him, as if in preparation to stand up again. “I have the car today from my brother, so I can zoom. And as of this morning I think I’m back on my boss’s good side. I know I’m his favorite.”

“You would be my favorite, too,” Ivan commented. “I bet you have a very fun job. Do you like it?”

Alfred straightened his glasses and said without any hesitation, “I love it.”

“I must let you go back to it, then,” Ivan declared. “Also, there is—”

“It’s chill, really,” Alfred promised, standing up anyway and dusting off his pants. He combed a hand through his hair. “Listen, the date was awesome. You can keep the nachos if you want, but you’re definitely getting that soup recipe for me, please.”

There was still red juice on the side of Alfred's mouth. "There is red juice on the side of your mouth," Ivan notified.

"Oh, oops. Thanks." Alfred swiped the stain away with the back of his hand. It was silent for a second. The wind picked up again. Ivan stared. Then Alfred blurted out, "Please tell me you weren't inclining to, like, kiss and suck it off of me."

Ivan covered his face to keep from laughing out loud. " *No* , I...I don't know, I do not know, I did not mean..." He was getting used to getting flustered.

Alfred grinned and crossed his arms. "Yeah, no offense, but that's pretty sketch."

Ivan sighed and folded his hands. "I don't want to kiss your food, but maybe I just want to kiss you."

Alfred's eyebrows shot up. "Oh."

Was that a positive reaction? Ivan stepped forward anyway, and was rewarded by Alfred not backing away in terror. He cautiously set his hands on Alfred's shoulders. Alfred straightened up, accentuating their height difference. "Can I kiss you?" Ivan asked softly.

Alfre blinked once. His blue eyes had stars in them. For a fleeting second Ivan worried Alfred would unintentionally ruin the feeble mood by responding with some pop culture reference, or even be turned-off by the question and shake his head with a dumb utterance of *no homo.* But he only nodded, with a steady voice said, "You can," and closed his eyes.

So Ivan kissed him on the cheek. The *alternate* cheek from the food spill. He had determined he wasn't ready for a lips-kiss—not yet, at least. A cheek kiss felt sweeter and more reminiscent of their young relationship, or whatever it was. And besides, he still got to be close to Alfred, and that felt really good. Alfred smelled like Old Spice. Alfred kissed Ivan back on his opposite cheek, and the temples of his glasses brushed against Ivan's hair.

They pulled away and Alfred was beaming, which made Ivan feel beautiful things inside. “I like the date too,” Ivan admitted.

When Alfred was gone, disappearing back into life and D.C., Ivan cleaned up the picnic. He was in a haze of happiness. How could he have doubted what they were doing? Being with Alfred was obviously the right solution, the *only* solution, no matter *what* illicit activity Ivan practiced in his own time. Whatever happened, Ivan would let happen. There was no way he could neglect Alfred. Alfred was funny and charismatic and hot and loud and smart and dumb and amazing and Ivan was falling in…

Ivan was in…

Ivan was in a crowded metro car, traveling north a few blocks. He bounced his leg to the beat coming from the teenager’s earbuds next to him and held his groceries and picnic basket tightly to himself. He would eventually have a third piece of luggage before making it back home.

The street above looked no different than it had last Friday, which was to say, Wang Yao’s food truck was there, waiting, like a faithful servant. Ivan waited for a few moments for the lunch line to die down, and then approached.

“ *You* ,” the man hissed at first sight. Maybe he was hissing. Maybe that was just the fryers in the background, or the Chinese rap coming from the speakers. “Here to pick up an order?”

“I am.” Ivan tilted his head in delight. Yao was so boisterous it was almost terrifying. “No chopsticks.”

Yao rolled his eyes and spat something completely cheerful and optimistic about the kind, hardworking, taxpaying citizens of Washington. He disappeared into the bowels of the truck for a few seconds and emerged with a familiar black bag. Ivan’s computer.

“Thank you,” said Ivan, taking it gratefully. “Is it...fresh...and, um healthy?”

“You keep using food metaphor and I will stab you with your damn chopsticks.” Yao smiled brightly.

“You keep up the good business and I will tip you even more.” Ivan smiled brighter. He put both his hands on the counter and pushed himself up. “Tell me: is it good?”

Yao backed away, outwardly disgusted, but Ivan could tell there was just the smallest tinge of fear in his eyes. He wondered if the man had ever taken a bribe before. “It is good.”

“Good.” Ivan set down. “If it is not, I will know, and I will come back. But for now, I would like one fortune cookie, please!”

.

Matthew hauled himself up into the cabin and inspected the fuel. “Oh! It’s almost on empty.”

“Sorry,” Alfred sighed. “I, uh, kinda sat in front of NASA headquarters for thirty minutes with full air conditioning and radio just to make sure I wasn’t being followed, and traffic, as always, is hell. The whale-savers were out again.”

Matt bumped him in the shoulder. “Wait a second—making sure you weren’t being followed? Your job is real strange. You okay?”

Alfred fidgeted in the Ford’s leather seating like a little kid. “How do you know if you like-like someone, like, too much to be, like, like-like?” he rushed out.

Matthew turned the engine off and got quiet—quieter than usual. “Eh...do you mean, like...love?”

“No. Yes. Maybe. I don’t know. Sure.”

“Okay, whoa. Al, really.” Matt leaned forward, forcing Alfred to look at him with his trained police cop charm skills. “Are you okay?”

Alfred flashed a double thumbs-up. “Oh, I’m fine.” *They ask you how you are and you just have to say that you’re fine when you’re not really fine…*

His brother let the statement sit just long enough for it to be awkward. Then he inquired, “Who do you...like?”

“Me? No one. I’m asking for a friend.”

Matthew nodded very slowly. “I understand.”

“You do? Thanks, I knew you would.”

They waited for the passage of another seconds.

When it became clear Alfred wasn’t going to start spouting another nonsense, Matt cleared his throat and offered, “I say, if your friend suspects they’re in love, they probably are, or are at least becoming. And there’s nothing wrong with being wrong, either, if they realize later. Love is a powerful, essential trait to have these days, so it’s good to accept it when it happens, so the sooner they can let it grow.”

Alfred kicked himself beneath the seat. “Okay. Okay, um, that totally sounded like something from a children’s novel, but thanks. I’ll tell my friend a less cheesy version. I *am* asking for a friend. Thanks a lot.”

“You good?”

“Yeah. I think. Yeah.” Alfred opened the door and stepped out into the cool night.

Matt started the engine back up. “If you ever want to talk more, I’m here, you know. Drop by the station whenever you need.”

“Yeah, we’ll get donuts sometime!” Alfred promised. “ *Adios!* ”

“ *Au revoir* !” Matthew called. He and the truck roared away.

Chapter End Notes

poker face - gaga

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Hey, everyone! It’s that time of year where schedules get hectic, so I wasn’t able to update last week, and I’ll be in the big city this weekend, and testing and more travel and everything, so be warned there might be a few more delays in updates. But hey this chapter’s pretty long so that’s cool.

In other news, I have made a loose playlist for this thing because why the hell not. Songs are posted at the end of each chapter.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

<3129111032>

<Files from Thursday's mission were received. However, a security breach on the line was detected Sunday. Our backup was sent in but unable to cover it up in time. This mistake has the potential to be detrimental. An appropriate amount for compensation will be extracted from your account.>

<Protect the computer and cable at all costs!!!>

<Keep safe.>

Ivan wasn't sure he had read the email correctly, so he read it again, and again, and once more. Messages from the circle were always concise and vague; Ivan didn't care that he was to assume compensation money had been supposedly "extracted" from his account. He was more concerned about being discovered. He had never made a "potentially detrimental" mistake before, and if he had, the shadow "backup" had always corrected it. Then again, Ivan had never hacked the FBI before, nor did he wish to be reprimanded for doing so to such a ruthless organization.

Most haunting were the last two words, which alluded to the true gravity of the situation. It had never seemed like the circle cared about his well-being before. Were they even in DC? Was "backup?" He stared silently into the bathroom mirror over the computer and had that same creepy sensation that someone else was watching him—the very feeling he used to sometimes get when talking to Mr. FBI, except his phone was still charging in his bedroom. The faucet spilled a single drip into the sink. A dog barked two floors up. The hair on Ivan's arms bristled.

Through the mirror, he watched the doorknob behind him *turn* .

Natalya walked in. They both caught themselves and exclaimed “Oh!” in perfect unison.

“Ivan. I apologize,” she said, retreating so only her face was visible through the crack between the trim.

It took a second longer this time for Ivan’s composure to wash over him, and the delay was scary. “Natalya!” he eventually breezed out. “ *I* apologize; I wish I had more than one bathroom.”

“We’ll be ready to go soon,” she informed with a dismissing nod. “Katya is washing breakfast dishes now. I plan to shower.”

“Yes. I am just finishing,” he declared, calmly stepping forward to place his hand on the knob. She got the hint and backed out.

And then Ivan remembered the computer. Behind him. Easily visible from the door through the mirror. His heartbeat began to pick up pace again.

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Alfred was feeling really good for once, a kind of good that carried over from his date with Ivan, stayed when he went to bed last night, stayed when he slept in and woke up late the next morning, and even remained as he was on his way into work now. He hadn’t checked in on Ivan through the spycam either last night or the next morning, but they had texted a little, making Alfred feel even better. He had no qualms about being late to work, and walked down the street with a spring in his step. Of course, though, he knew the feeling wouldn’t last. Being happy and enjoying himself came with a price these days.

It turned out Alfred wasn’t the only tardy attendee of the day. Someone called his name down the street, he turned around, and there was Toris, stepping out of his car and hustling towards him.

“Hey, dude!” Alfred offered. He couldn’t tell if Toris looked worried or if that was just Toris’s normal expression.

“Did you get the message?” Toris wheezed out as he caught up. So, worried, then.

“Uh, what message?” Alfred slowed his steps.

“From the Chief.” Toris gestured to his phone. “There has been a security breach. That’s all he said.”

Alfred froze in his tracks, and the temperature around them seemed to plummet accordingly. Had he heard Toris correctly? His movements were sluggish as he reached for his phone. Sure enough, right as he picked it out of his pocket, it burst into a frantic ringing. Arthur Kirkland’s name was at the top. “A security breach?”

Toris scratched his head. He, too, looked sick in the stomach. “I can’t believe it. It is the FBI. No one is supposed to be able to steal information from the FBI.”

“Wait a second, is it *us* ?” Alfred shoved his phone back into his pocket and hastened his pace again. “Someone hacked our divisions and stole data?”

Toris nodded. “I can’t believe it.”

When they checked into headquarters, Chief Héderváry was there. She was statuesque in her sharp pencil skirt, her hands crossed over her chest, wearing sunglasses. The dreaded memory-zapping stun gun rested at her hip.

“We—We heard there was bad news,” Alfred began tentatively, holding up his badge.

“So did I,” she confirmed, scanning their IDs and prints. “But I am smart enough to not to talk about it right here. You never know who could be listening.” She lowered her sunglasses

and gave them each a stern look and an indecipherable wink. “No stolen government secrets in my lobby.”

Alfred and Toris gulped in harmony.

Héderváry finished confirming their identities, sighed, and reached for the gun. “Time to run, now, boys. Today I’ll give you a five second head start.”

They both knew better than to stand around chatting. Alfred and Toris bolted for the elevators, the nightmarish sound of the gun charging up behind them.

“Go, go, go!” He pushed Toris into the elevator just as a bolt of energy glanced off the wall ahead of them. Alfred screamed and charged in himself, slamming the close button while Héderváry neared. Another bolt stung the interior of the box, and Toris fell to the floor. The doors shut on the Chief’s maniacal grin.

“That was too close,” Toris shivered. Alfred nodded.

“Gilbert once said she was the only person he truly feared,” He restated, gazing at the mirrored ceiling. They didn’t say much more after that.

Upon reaching the negative two hundredth floor, they found it was startlingly vacant. An aria of suspense hung in the humidity, and there was no sound but the coffee machine and frantic typing coming from deep within the cubicles.

When the elevators dinged, the typing halted, and Chief Arthur Kirkland rose out of the mist above the walls. His expression was furious and panicked, his thick eyebrows condensed into one angry unibrow. “You.”

Alfred gulped. “Sorry we’re late—”

Kirkland marched through the maze. “Yes, you’d better be sorry, boy. The past few hours have been hell. We’ve been *hacked* , Alfred. Files from our combined database—both the black and gray divisions—have been copied and *stolen* . Luckily, the rest of the FBI wasn’t affected, but they may as well have been. The hacker or hackers targeted us specifically through a *government network* .”

“Fuck,” Alfred breathed. That was huge. “Do we...do we know what was stolen? What network?”

“That,” alerted Arthur, “is what I’m working on. Today it’s all hands on deck. And what that *means* , Alfred F. Jones, is *no* lunch break.” Alfred gulped again. Did he…no. There was no way he knew. “If we all work together—well, all of us minus Francis and Antonio and Gilbert and Elizabeta and Ludwig, because three of them are practically presumed dead and two of them are with the enemy may we never show suspicion in absence—maybe we can solve this bloody mess faster.”

Toris spoke up nervously. “Um, and, what about monitoring? Our, erm, people?”

“If you can multitask, then by all means do so. After all” —another withering look cast at Alfred— “if anyone were to hack the FBI, it’s one of those buggers.”

Alfred’s heart was racing, and he suddenly felt sweatier. He didn’t know what to think, but he knew there was no way what Kirkland was insinuating was true. He had kept a particularly close eye on Ivan in the past few days. Wait. “Do we know *when* the breach occurred?”

The Chief nodded, slower and less sure of himself this time. “I did find bugs in the network on Friday, but only noticed the stolen data and connected the two occurrences yesterday. I say, while you’re at it, check your own computer. You wouldn’t want anyone…listening in.”

Déjà vu disguised as a freezing chill tiptoed down Alfred’s spine.

Toris immediately made a beeline for his computer. Arthur continued staring at Alfred. “What’s the matter. Have you noticed something? Have something to report? Any odd behavior from Ivan as of late?”

Alfred quickly shook his head *no.* Arthur had called Ivan *Ivan* this time, not just Braginsky like he normally did. “I just—”

Kirkland took a step forward and leaned in closer so Toris wouldn’t hear. He raised one bushy eyebrow in deadly speculation. “Any odd behavior from *anyone* as of late?”

There was no way. No. Way.

“I haven’t noticed anything,” Alfred stated, meeting the Chief eye-to-eye. It wasn’t a lie.

They held an impromptu staring contest for a couple of seconds, and then Alfred dropped his gaze. The Chief *tsk* ed. Softer, he stated, “It might be time to get you those upgraded glasses, then. The ones with the x-ray and the night-vision and the lasers and the recording you want. Ludwig has them now, and they seem to be working exceptionally.” And with that, he stalked off.

Alfred let out a long breath of air he hadn’t realized he had been holding in. He was no longer feeling really good.

He slowly crossed over to his cubicle and plunked down into the wheely chair. Sluggishly, he dug his laptop from his workbag, swept an arm across his desk to clear space, and opened up the computer in the middle. In one window he pulled up a visual of Ivan. In the other, he pulled up the shared database of the black and gray divisions.

Alfred was smart. Not intelligent like Arthur Kirkland perhaps, but smart enough to do well in school, and smart enough to get into the FBI at the youngest age allowed. Alfred could handle this. Hack into his own database to track down a previous database hacker? Easy-beaver eager-peasy difficult-squeezy lemon. He cracked his knuckles and went to work.

In the other window, Alfred could hear Ivan and his sisters talking. They seemed to be complaining about the heat and their feet. He flashed over to their screen for a hot sec. Ivan had the camera open and was taking pictures of his sisters in some park in DC, and they kept

trying to block out the lens. Alfred smiled to himself. Ivan's sisters did look a lot like him. It was cute. Alfred should text him.

Alfred should not text him. Alfred should work on tracking down the security breach. He scanned lines of code, his brain already throbbing from absorbing the computer language and the Slavic language at the same time. He lowered Ivan's volume and minimized the window. The database, the database, what had been stolen from the database?

Encoded files filled his field of vision. There would be clues left behind, if Alfred could only think to look for them. He rolled for a perception check.

"How much longer?" Yekaterina moaned. "Please tell me the water's just up ahead. Otherwise you're carrying this backpack the rest of the way."

"Only ten minutes," answered Ivan. "And if you stand up really tall, you can see the dome!"

Natalya scoffed. "You'd have to lift me."

Nothing about their data seemed to have been...altered, as far as Alfred could tell. Any malware was either expertly hidden or nonexistent. For the time being, Alfred decided to assume it was nonexistent. "Got anything?" he mumble-called out to the others openly.

"No," Toris responded meekly next to him behind the cubicle wall. Even more distant was the Chief's voice.

"Not yet, but I'm working on the IP address."

Alfred considered. The whole situation was ironic, really. The hackers became the hacked, and suddenly their whole pattern was thrown off. He was at least glad they had discovered the breach right away. For many organizations, a data breach could take months, or even years to detect. But those organizations were name-brand; open source; top-page. The general public was supposed to never know Alfred's division of the FBI existed, memes or no. He

didn't even want to imagine what would happen if their secrets got out; there would be global outrage.

So how had the hacker(s) know to come after them? Had they been targeting the black and gray specifically, or stumbled across their existence whilst scanning the rest of the government network? In either case, the government could be in serious trouble. Alfred wasn't aware of how often the government got hacked, exactly, but he knew at least that. The government was shit sometimes, but damn Alfred if he didn't depend on it.

A few hours later, in the middle of running a loop, Alfred felt his phone buzz in his pocket. He heaved a grateful sigh, let the computer run, and opened it up. Ivan had texted him a photo of one of those cats from Russian tumblr. It was a Sphynx wearing little red underwear, the caption underneath spelling out "shaved and ready for solarium." Alfred didn't wait for the translation—he answered *Yassss. look at those legs gurl. get that summer body glow. what a queen.*

Ivan: i made this one on myself. (≧∀≦*) do u think i should post?*

Ivan: wow how do you know what it says?

Crap. Alfred had been listening to Ivan and his sisters talking in Russian and had forgotten that he wasn't supposed to know Russian.

Alfred: google translate

Ivan: very fast.

Alfred: ...don't use that period at me of course i'm fast

Ivan: ;)(;

Alfred: yes u should post

Ivan: you know spanish too?

Alfred: ...

Alfred: buenos días muchacha latas

Ivan: O_O

Ivan: okay i have to go see things in the city now goodbye

Alfred: well goodbye

He tabbed over to the window where Ivan's phone was on. It appeared Ivan and his sisters were just leaving the Jefferson Memorial, his camera pointed at the bordering Tidal Basin as he texted. He was smiling that soft little smile.

Alfred: ♡

Ivan's smile grew.

Ivan: ♡

Ivan turned off his phone.

Faint typing sounds came from Toris's cubicle next to Alfred's. He pushed himself away from his desk and stretched, spinning around in his chair a couple of times. It was amazing how just two minutes of Alfred texting Alfred's... *boyfriend* ...could fix a whole morning of nausea and anxiety. He was still scared of the hackers, and *god* was he starved (stale deli lunch sandwiches from the break room mini-fridge didn't last anyone), but at least he still had Ivan.

Alfred reluctantly scooted back towards his desk to check the tests he had been running on the database. He didn't expect anything to pop out at him, and sure enough, all the data seemed fine.

Alfred blew air out of his nostrils. Whoever had done this seemed to know exactly what they were doing. He or she or they hadn't even tripped the protection alarms. It was almost as if they had been handed an easy map of the whole database that listed all the hidden lasers and boobie-traps. The numbers and letters were beginning to confuse even Alfred.

"Um, has anyone found anything?" came Toris's voice beyond the wall.

"Working on it," grumbled Alfred. Chief Kirkland across the room offered up no response but a jumble of furious typing.

What would Alfred do if he were trying to steal information from the FBI? What information would he want to steal? Well, for one, he could go into their division outlines and use all their confidential information to sue the place, exposing them for operating as such under their *special* terms. But maybe he wasn't that ambitious yet. He could use the files they had on Ivan or Vargas or Felicks. He could use the files they had on—

The elevator dinged. Everyone paused and turned, but it was only Elizabeta Héderváry. She passed through them on her way to the break room, giving each a nod. "I was hungry for a snack, and then I remembered Antonio always keeps extra tomatoes for desperate times!" Her voice thinned as she entered the kitchen. "Too bad they will not be fresh."

Alfred almost called out a "About as fresh as their keeper by this point," but bit his tongue at the last second. He had thought of something.

If he were a hacker, maybe he *did* know what he was doing by specifically targeting the division database. Maybe he *needed* to know what he was doing because he needed the information the division had stored. Maybe he wasn't just a random hacker, and this wasn't just a one-time, random scheme. Maybe his *reason* for hacking specifically had something to do with a very specific scheme, such as, say, a recent string of disappearances.

Alfred rolled for a wisdom check and went straight to the the FBI's working personnel files. After a few more *specific* tests, he found just what he had been looking for. Files for Antonio Fernandez Carriedo, Francis Bonnefoy, and Gilbert Beilschmidt had all been copied, along with their statements of service.

Ivan's voice echoed faintly from the monitor. "You two, stop dipping your hands in every reservoir in Washington!" Giggling followed. Alfred's heart throbbed. *He* wanted to be out there with Ivan in the bright summer day, exploring the city and dipping his hands in reservoirs, not slaving away in the dank swamp bunker underground.

"Agent Jones! Are you working?"

In a flash, Alfred silenced Ivan's visual, though he really had no reason to. Kirkland had appeared out of nowhere behind him. Alfred wheeled around slowly, but before he could explain that he *had* indeed been working, Arthur interrupted.

"I was able to trace the IP address."

Alfred sat up hurriedly. "That's great! Bitch, where?"

Kirkland was staring at his clipboard as if he didn't believe whatever was written on it. "The...Museum of Natural History."

Toris's chair creaked in the next cubicle over. "What?"

“You’re kidding.” Alfred brushed his hands through his hair, giving the gears in his head fresh air. “That rings a bell. Holy guacamole.” He thought back before his date on Monday, to the Sunday afternoon before, to something small and insignificant his best friend had uttered in passing. “That’s—That’s what Kiku said!” He was surprised he even remembered.

The Chief, Alfred recalled, did know Kiku. “Kiku...Kiku Honda? Your friend who works at the museum? Well, tell me, man, what did he say?”

“We were chillin’ on Sunday, right, and he said they found a virus or something on one of their computers and he was being called in to fix it. I wonder if...if that was the hacked computer.”

Arthur took another step forward. “And you? Did you find anything?”

“Heck yeah I did.” Alfred swiveled around and blew up his findings. “Get a load of this. Nothing was altered, but all the MIA guys—their files were copied.”

Arthur got up real close to the screen, his nose almost touching at. All at once he pulled back. “As if the hackers knew what they were looking for. The bastards. We’ve got to tell Chief Héderváry.”

Toris peeked over the short wall, folding his arms across it. His voice was small and distant. “You are not thinking…?”

Kirkland massaged his forehead. “Whoever is doing this knows what they’re doing, that’s for certain. I don’t want to make any assumptions anymore, but it looks like we *are* being specifically targeted, perhaps for a greater purpose. It can’t be a coincidence that the same files copied coincide to our missing personnel. I just wonder...did the hackers secure the files before or after the three were kidnapped?”

“I haven’t gotten there yet,” Alfred supplied.

“Me neither,” said Toris gloomily. “This puzzle is very tedious; almost too difficult for me to unlock.”

Arthur tucked his clipboard under his arms and crossed them. He inspected his employees for a couple of seconds, and Alfred felt another ghostly hand tap his back. In that moment he deduced there was definitely something Arthur knew—or suspected—that he wasn’t letting on. The trust Alfred had thought he had earned from him had evaporated.

There was another thing Kiku had told Alfred on Sunday, too. *You should either end your engagement with Ivan now, or tell someone what has been happening. I suggest the latter. I know I would be fired instantly if I withheld information from my superiors.*

Alfred glanced at the minimized tab on his laptop screen. If he opened it up, he would see Ivan and his sisters, walking home after a long day, peaceful in his city, his country. *Then fire me.*

“Let’s work on it, then,” Kirkland declared. “After what we’ve already accomplished, simply finding the time shan’t be too hard. And Alfred, if what Mr. Honda said is true, I’d like to speak with him, please.”

“Oh, I can call him later tonight when he gets off work,” Alfred offered.

“That won’t be necessary,” Arthur stated, straightening his tie. “You can give me his contact information and I can do it myself. Or—you could just give me your phone.”

Toris quickly ducked back down into his cubicle.

Now Alfred was really scared. He would have to delete all of Ivan’s texts, clear his history… “Fine,” he muttered. “I’ll write down Kiku’s number.”

The Chief nodded fiercely. “Good. Glad we can come to an agreement.”

.

Ivan had gotten used to staying up late. It was the only free time he had to talk to Alfred, were he felt especially assured his sisters couldn't find them out. "...just got home," Alfred was saying, sounding exhausted over FaceTime. It was past two in the morning.

"Oh no," Ivan whispered. "Why?"

"Long day at work. Really long. Felt too tired to text."

"I'm sorry." Ivan reached out to touch the screen, and then chided himself and pulled back. "If you were here I would give you a big hug."

"I wish. I mean, I wish you were here or I was there." He sounded uncharacteristically broken. "I could use a hug real bad right now."

Ivan sat up. "I could sneak out and come to give you a hug."

Alfred laughed quietly and turned off his lamp so his visual was plunged into darkness.

"Where do you live, Alfred?" Ivan listened for his sisters' snores. They were there, loud and deep and steady. He would do it.

"Sorry. I'm gonna go to sleep now." Ivan heard the shuffling of blankets.

"Oh."

"Thanks."

Ivan held the phone closer. “*Спокойной ночи,*” he whispered, then inhaled and waited.

“‘Night to you too,” Alfred mumbled.

Ivan exhaled. The call went dead.

Chapter End Notes

ring the alarm - beyoncé

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Any theories yet? ;)(;

This is the singular free day I had this week so of course I had to update. Also school’s out and I didn’t fail anything so woooo. I’m as exhausted as Alfred here.

Visit my tumblr or derevoskymusor’s to see adorable art derevosky made from the last chapter!!!! This is, my friends, an order.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alfred picked up his phone Wednesday morning for a different purpose than talking to Ivan for once. He dialed Kiku and crossed his fingers that his friend would pick up. After the fourth ring, the museum worker was there with a cordial “Hello?”

“Yo.” Alfred rubbed at his eyes. “Did...Did Arthur Kirkland happen to...call you, last night?”

The other side of the line was a clear sort of fuzzy. After a pause, Kiku answered. “He did.”

Shit. “Um, okay, cool. And what did he say?”

Another pause. God, this was as awkward as their college breakup. “He told me about your problem. Not *your* problem as in—well, I mean the problem you and the FBI are having with...security.”

The shivers were tickling Alfred again. “Right. Yes. Totally. I just wanted to know if you remembered the guy you were telling me about last week or whenever. I was doing some thinking last night and...the guy in the elevator. Him. You said he was weird…?”

“Yes, Mr. Kirkland and I have considered him as our main suspect. We are working on identifying him now through security footage. The timing fits, though it is difficult to imagine he was able to... *do* so much in such little time.”

So they had already talked about everything and were considering suspects. Alfred was relieved that they were able to come to a conclusion and solve the hacking case so quickly, but worried about how Arthur had left Alfred completely out of the picture in doing so. It was a sketch move. “Did he say anything else about any *other* sort of problems?”

Kiku responded without hesitation this time. “No.”

Alfred sighed grimly. “I understand.”

.

The SAVE THE WHALES people were back. And today, they were blocking traffic.

“In Washington, D.C.!” Ivan complained, mostly to himself. This was much an annoyance. He and his sisters had rented a car with intentions to drive out to Chesapeake Bay and spend the day at the beach. But they couldn’t do that if they couldn’t get out of the city, could they. “Traffic is already bad enough here.”

“Should we call an Uber?” Yekaterina wondered peacefully from the backseat. The sight of Ivan’s sisters in their swimsuits and sunscreen, all ready to go if they only had a way, made him frustrated.

“How would it get here?” Natalya pointed out. “Let’s just roll down the windows and tell them to move. Politely, of course.”

Ivan sighed, watching the police motorcycles and pedestrians weave in and out of each other up ahead. Behind him there were horns. He rolled the windows down and let in some warm air, the same warm air that blew against the giant signs and banners. He inched the car forward.

A teenager wearing an oversized blue T-shirt that read “MARINE FISHING IS MEAN FISHING” was parading down the line of cars, peeping into windows and handing out flyers. Ivan almost rolled the rental’s windows back up.

“Hello!” the kid said, somewhat meekly, when he reached them. He fumbled with the enormous stack of flyers in his hands, his eyes wide and frantic and on everything but Ivan. “Would you like—”

“I am sorry, but we are not interested,” Ivan deadpanned. “Can you move?” he prodded, allowing his irritation to seep into his voice.

The teenager’s gaze finally met Ivan’s, and he gave a startled little hiccup. “O-Oh, okay.” He put a hand in his messy light brown hair. “You are. Um. I will…” He turned and began power-walking back down the strip toward the rest of his nature-loving posse.

“Well,” laughed Yekaterina. “That worked. I think you scared him, Vanya.”

“Vanya hopes he scared them all as well,” Ivan said back, only half-teasing. “I don’t want stupid politics to ruin our beach day.”

“We have an hour drive anyway,” Natalya pointed out, propping her sunglasses on the top of her head and propping open a book. “May as well leave it up to fate.”

Fate, as it turned out, was feeling generous. Within the span of five minutes, the road was clear. Whether this was due to Ivan’s “polite request” or the police’s further actions to control the situation could not be determined. What he knew was that once he hit the open interstate, nothing stood between them and the sea.

While on the freeway, Ivan turned up the radio and let his thoughts wonder. The overplayed pop anthems allowed him the perfect environment to muster over the morning’s messages. He had received exactly one from the spy ring and none from Alfred. This was uncanny in the sense that the spy ring didn’t often send him simple one-liner messages that just said < *Due to recent events, the security of your identity and position have been threatened!!! Take preventative measures immediately!!!* > and Alfred *often* sent him simple one-liner messages that just said *mornin’* or *i didn get no sleep cuz of y’allll!* It was an understatement to say Ivan was scared. So he roared out of DC with his sisters, intending to get away from life’s complications for a little while.

Ivan gripped the steering wheel. In the backseat, Natalya was still immersed in her book while Yekaterina rested her head against the window, staring at the scenery outside. Maybe when he returned to the city, everything would be magically fixed.

Maybe he wouldn't even return to the city. Maybe he would snag Alfred and stowaway with his sisters back home. Self-care.

An hour later, Ivan brought the rental car to a stop near the rock wall separating a small Maryland beach town from the wide blue of the Chesapeake Bay. The world was quiet here, but Katya and Natalya certainly were not. The second he parked, they were hopping out and digging beach balls and more sunscreen from the trunk. Ivan helped them, carrying the picnic basket that held their towels. Taking a breath of fresh, salty air, they trucked down to the beach.

It was a sparsely-crowded and narrow strip of sand, but after a couple minutes of walking down through the tide with bare feet, giggling at the seaweed tickling their ankles, they found an open spot and set up camp. Natalya attempted blowing up the beach ball, her face turning a frustrated shade of red. Yekaterina bashfully slipped out of her cover-up sundress. "It's been a while since I've been to the beach; I fear my swimsuit body isn't ready."

Ivan smiled at her. "I think you're beautiful. You both are. And if anyone thinks anything different, I will kill them."

Yekaterina giggled and pushed sand at him. "Let's just see if I remember how to swim first."

The three made a break for the waves. Surprisingly, Natalya was the one to shy away at first, complaining that the water was too cold. The bow holding up her hair tossed in the wind. She danced along the edge of the water, hugging herself and only venturing in up to her knees until Ivan took her hand and showed her that, far out, there was a net keeping them from washing off to Virginia. And then Yekaterina splashed her.

"Hey!" Natalya shrieked. "Fine!" She let go of Ivan and waded in further. "I'm coming in. And I'm coming for *you!* "

They chased each other all the way to the pier. Ivan was a weak swimmer at best, but he was the tallest and strongest, so he could swing his sisters around on his arms, carry them through the water bridal style, shrieking all the way, and attempt to balance them on his shoulders. This did not always work out. "Water went up my nose!" Yekaterina cried, and they toppled

into the sea. Somewhere along the line Ivan started to imagine Alfred was with them, wearing his sunglasses, holding the rainbow beach ball, dark tan and shirtless… Ivan wondered if Alfred would care about how Ivan's rash guard didn't fully conceal his layer of stomach fat or the waterproof bandages around his neck. Katya tried to tickle him and he splashed backwards, warding her off by pulling Natalya in front of him, who yelped, laughed and spun in a circle, dragging her arm to create a water spiral. Ivan stepped back again, his foot touching a rock underwater. When he tested the floor once more, the floor suddenly wasn't there, and he plummeted downwards.

Ivan flailed out his arms and opened his eyes in surprise. The brackish water stung, but he did catch a murky glimpse of something small and white floating in a ray of sun five feet to his left. He resurfaced and sputtered, swimming closer to his sisters, who had continued the splash fight without him.

"There's something in the water," Ivan informed dutifully.

"A shark!" Yekaterina sang.

Natalya just folded her arms and looked pointedly at him. "Have something to confess, Vanya?"

Ivan splashed them both. "No! I'm being serious!" Yet he couldn't help but giggle at their responses. "I'm not sure, but...I think it's a—"

A few meters away from them, a little girl in a purple princess floatable began to wail, pointing to the space in front of her. "JELLYFISH!"

Yekaterina's body went still. "Not a shark."

Natalya was the only one in the vicinity who immediately didn't begin to make her way to the shore. "Really?" she asked, trying to peek around Ivan for a better look. "Where?"

Ivan laughed, tugging her inland. “It could sting you! Come on!” They seemed to be having a lot to do with ocean wildlife in one day.

And so the three siblings washed back up to the beach. Ivan collapsed on his towel, trying to gasp and sigh at the same time. Yekaterina fell down next to him, dusting wet and dry sand off her legs. Natalya strayed, remaining at the edge of the water, watching curiously for more gelatinous bay creatures.

Once Ivan had caught his breath, he rolled over and dug his phone out of the picnic basket. He snapped a quick picture of the beach scenery and sent it to Alfred.

Ivan: happy birthday raven!!!

He responded back so promptly it made Ivan’s heart rate speed up again.

Alfred: when we finally drive the british away Lafayette is there waiting

Ivan: what (˘ ͜ʖ ˘)

Alfred: what

Ivan: i came out to have a good time and i was almost attacked by a jellyfish. ;) how is your day

Alfred: a jellyfish omg that’s rad tho do u have any pics

Ivan: no i look bad

Alfred: no no u look good

Yekaterina had lain down and put her sun hat on. Ivan readjusted to make sure she wasn't reading his messages or seeing his facial expressions.

Ivan: well, I did not come to america to be model

Alfred: ;)(;

Ivan: hey that's my thing ;)(;

Alfred: wait lol

Alfred: so why did you come to america

"Ivan," Katya chided abruptly, turning over. "When are you finally going to tell us who you're always texting so much?"

Ivan froze. How...how could she know? He hadn't...she hadn't seen anything, had she? In a nanosecond, his mind flashed back through every instance where he'd had his phone out in front of his sisters. His memory couldn't recall a particular instance where she'd gotten ahold of it. Like a broken faucet, he sputtered out, "What?"

Alfred: yo dude where'd u go

She grinned playfully. "Your older sister sees everything. Don't think that just because I've been gone, I've gone blind. You have a special someone on the other end of that thing, don't you!"

Okay, so she was more clever than he had presumed. Maybe it was the water in his ears, but the atmosphere was taking on more pressure. “I’m not texting anyone,” he lamely said.

“You are!” In a horrifying moment, Yekaterina lunged for the phone and snatched it out of Ivan’s hand before Ivan could un-freeze. She turned away and started scrolling through the text conversation.

Fire raced through his veins, and all of a sudden Ivan was furious. He pawed roughly at her shoulder, wrestling to seize back the phone. It fell out of both their grasps and plopped neatly on the sand a foot away, face-up. And the second it did, the screen lit up again with another message: Alfred’s contact name, Alfred❤️, over a line of text that read *hey are you there i asked a question* . Yekaterina squealed.

Her English isn’t good , Ivan told himself as he managed to secure hold of his phone. Maybe she hadn’t really seen or understood it. He should have left the dumb device at home.

“It’s for work,” Ivan grumbled, the lie finally coming to him.

“Are you *sure?* ” she teased.

“ *Yes!* ” Ivan glared at her. “And you’re going to *forget* about it.”

Katya shut up all at once, her face falling. Ivan had seen her be a crybaby many times before, but this time she looked less hurt and more pitiful towards him. He hated it worse.

Alfred: okay then lol that wasn’t suspicious at all well i’ll just go then byee

Ivan briefly glanced down at the messages. There was no way he could answer the “Why did you come to America?” question anyway, so he just didn’t say anything. Maybe he could make up an excuse later for leaving him on read. He silenced Alfred, turned his phone all the way off, and threw it back into the picnic basket. “Don’t touch,” he warned Yekaterina. “I’m

going to go build a sandcastle with Natalya now." So much for hoping his sisters would accept him.

"Okay," Katya whimpered, clutching her sun hat to her chest.

The rest of the afternoon proceeded relatively normally. After a while the mood lightened, as did the sun, and the three eventually came together to work on the castle. The sand always dried too fast to stick, causing a frustrated Natalya to punch a hole in the mock onion dome. The tide wasn't strong enough to flow in and make a moat, so they made due with a 15-centimeter-wide trench. The end structure reached up to Ivan's mid-calves, though, which was impressive. They took a selfie in front of it.

After packing up their gear and showering off, the trio walked the beachfront. Stretching all the way to the horizon were rows of cute restaurants and bars; they stopped for ice cream, and then stopped for lemonade, and then sandwiches. They ate supper at the end of a long wooden fisherman's pier, their bare, aching feet dangling off the edge, past the point marked DANGER ZONE.

"I want to sleep here," Ivan decided, curling his towel further around himself as a cool breeze drifted by.

"I wonder if the jellyfish glow in the dark," Natalya mused. Her bow had dried out with wrinkles and had slipped to the side of her head.

"I think I need another panini," Yekaterina voiced, burping, and then laughing.

The closer they got back to the rental car, the more unsettled Ivan's stomach became. He even considered booking a hotel out here for them to stay the night, but didn't think he had enough. He asked Yekaterina to drive. For some reason, he just did not want to go back home.

Natalya sensed something was wrong as she leaned her head against Ivan's shoulder in the back seat. The sunset tapped against the windows. "Why are you tense and scared, Ivan?" she whispered, taking his hand.

He pondered over the possibility of her knowing about his texting, too. “I’m not,” he assured her.

“I don’t want to go back home, either,” she told him, drawing a circle on his palm. Ivan had the distant urge to pull away.

Instead, he just averted his eyes, watching the cars slip and slide alongside theirs on the road. “I think I would like to see Russia again.”

Soon after, Yekaterina found a smooth jazz station on the radio, and they sank down into sleep.

Ivan had a dream. He was standing in his kitchen—not the kitchen in his DC apartment, but the kitchen that belonged to his childhood home, a cozy cabin on the outskirts of Moscow. It appeared he was making some sort of cake, but was following directions through comments on his meme account. Every time he tried to scroll up to find the next step, the page refreshed and he was brought all the way to the bottom. If this wasn’t freaky enough already, Ivan was sure the cake smelled like Alfred’s taco mess from their date. The sense was so clear. He turned off the WiFi on his phone so he wouldn’t get any more messages, and then finally was he able to reach the next step in his recipe. But the final direction, in the form of a comment, just said “visit my profile.” With nothing else to do, Ivan hit the link to visit the profile. The entire account was empty, except for the profile picture. It was a blurry photo of a black-haired man in an elevator. Ivan was gently shaken awake by his sister before he could do any more research.

“The whale people are gone,” Katya commented with a yawn. They were back in Washington, the sun barely clinging to the horizon.

Ivan yawned and found he had a splitting headache. He closed his eyes on the streets outside. They were more tranquil than before, and substantially less crowded. Yekaterina was correct. There wasn’t a terrified kid with informative flyers to be seen. How strange.

Ivan moved like a cloud, in a lazy haze to return the car, guide his siblings through the subway home, and unlock his apartment. He felt sun-dried and weary, too tired to stress over

the present ambiance of *wrongness* that had attached itself to him the second he had woken up. Natalya mixed them all vodka cocktails, and Ivan downed his in record time. He moved to the shower.

The bathroom fan was loud and blocked out the sound of Ivan typing as he logged onto his illegal laptop computer. With gnawing dread, he opened just the last new email sent to him from his superiors. Like its predecessor, it was a simple one-liner, and it chilled Ivan to the bone.

<You've been discovered. The shadow is unsuccessful. We're in jeopardy.>

<Don't come back to Washington, D.C.>

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Chief Matthew Williams of the metropolitan police *also* picked up on the fourth ring. Alfred was fed up. "What—do I have to go yodel in Wal-Mart to get any attention around here?"

"Hey, Al," his brother sighed. "Um, I'm sorry. I'm very busy at the moment."

He did sound like he had been working all day, which, Alfred could almost certainly tell, he had. "What's the latest on the situation?"

Matt's voice got quieter. "Uh...which situation, exactly?"

"Good golly, *any* of them at this point." Alfred tossed his spoon into the sink. He had just finished off the last of Ivan's sister's soup for a late dinner, and soon it would be back to the grind. "Today at work it was *silent* . Kirkland didn't say *anything* to us but 'Let me handle the rest of the hacking stuff.' It makes no sense, man. Please tell me you know something. Did he talk to you? Like he talked to Kiku and everyone else but me?"

There was a long pause. Alfred saw it coming. “You told me to talk to you whenever,” he said, softer.

Matthew’s voice was pained as he sighed out, “Alfred…”

“What. What is it. I’m listening.”

More pauses, more uncertainty. “I’m sorry. I—I can’t.”

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

“I need to go. Goodnight, Alfred. Maybe we can talk again tomorrow morning at the station.”

He definitely knew something. They all definitely knew something. Maybe there wasn’t just a hacker probe happening here. Alfred was going to launch his own investigation into the mess.

“Goodnight,” he told his brother, but the line was already dead.

Chapter End Notes

danger zone - gwen

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Wow, is it getting hot in here, or is it just me? You're in for another little treat next chapter! Watch your cameras.

Should I start using the English alphabet instead of Cyrillic for the few times when I'll write in Russian on here? Or like post translations if they're needed? I honestly have no preference, so whatever floats your boat.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

the gray division

They were now on escape plan K, and things were still not looking up.

“Here he comes!” hissed Francis as the sound of feet on concrete neared. “Everyone act natural!”

Francis immediately slumped over in his chains, miming a peaceful sleep. Gilbert sneezed, and then coughed, and them sneezed again. Antonio sat up straight. When Lovino entered, Antonio grinned and chirped out a “Hi.”

“Stop looking at me like that with your dirty wet whore face,” Lovino advised, folding his arms and coming to a stop in front of him.

Francis “woke up” and fluttered his eyelashes. He had spotted the key that bounced against Lovino’s hip. “Oh, what is happening?”

“We’re going on a frickin’ road trip,” he supplied, not taking his eyes off of Antonio. “Which means I will have to take off the chains. Try anything and I’ll cut you.”

Antonio gulped. “I’m—I’m not scared.”

Lovino asserted his dominance by T-posing, Chris Pratt-style. “I think you are.”

“My God, *I am,* ” Antonio breathed.

It happened in a flash. Lovino lunged forward, pulling some sort of cloth out of nowhere and covering Antonio's nose and mouth with it. Antonio struggled, eyes widening, chest lifting up—but it only took a few seconds before he was out cold. A siesta: hardcore version.

Gilbert and Francis squeaked in perfect harmony. Lovino assessed his work, nodding in satisfaction. Then he advanced toward them.

"This is how you got us the first time!" Gilbert shrieked. "Oh, I can still *feel* the bowling ball return around my poor, poor arm…"

"Ah, and I had such a *mal de tête* when I woke up!" Francis was panicking. "What if I do not breathe?"

Lovino closed in. "Trust me—you would be doing us all a favor."

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Signore Feliciano Vargas was a *mafioso* for all the wrong reasons: his university grades were dismal, he was insecure, he owned no cats, and he had been in love far too many times. He just *knew* he was the one that would defeat the FBI and save Grandpa and Lovino but most importantly Lovino—he *had* to be. However, the journey to do as such would put all of Feliciano and all of his reasonings to the test.

The morning Agent Ludwig Beilschmidt was brought in to monitor his life was slightly chilly. There were definite hopes of it heating up, however. It was Sunday, the day after the interview at the police station, and Feliciano was taking himself to church. Ludwig met him there, wearing a dress shirt—no FBI jacket—and slacks and...were those glasses? Those were glasses! Feliciano grinned. Ludwig looked good in glasses. Why hadn't he worn them before? Feliciano wondered if Ludwig went to church, and how ironic it was that the government was getting involved in religion for this, and if Ludwig would ask him weird questions about it, and if Ludwig planned on holding his hand during the ceremony, and if the priest would scorn them if he knew the real reason Ludwig was there. Feliciano had to catch

himself before voicing any of these concerns, remembering how he had been strictly warned by a certain someone not to talk too much and say something condemning.

In the end, Feliciano spent most of mass thinking about that certain someone and their empty seat next to him—the empty seat Ludwig filled. Ludwig didn't sing, but he did hold Feliciano's hand and say *peace* . That was something.

Afterwards, they took the metro to Feliciano's apartment. While Ludwig had visited Feliciano at his produce market, Ludwig had never been here, at least in *person* . Ludwig's FBI partner, however, had. Feliciano had watched the pretty lady interviewing Feliciano's neighbor through the peephole in his door shortly after Feliciano's interrogation at the police station. The scene in the hallway had not lasted long, and Elizabeta Héderváry hadn't returned, so Feliciano assumed he was safe and that his "alibi checked out." Feliciano had been told not to interact with too many outsiders for fear of creating a memorable impression, but it was just against Feliciano's nature not to be friendly with the neighbors! And now it had paid off, so *ha* .

"We're here!" he announced, beckoning Ludwig inside his small home with a dramatic flourish. "I know it is not much, but it is ours. *Mine* , I mean . It is mine."

Ludwig seemed lost in thought as he surveyed. "It is much, though." His voice was flat. "It's a mess."

Feliciano laughed nervously as he shut the door behind them and dead-bolted it. (Rent was cheaper on the seedier side of town.) "I was moving things around last night; sorry. Would you like lunch, Ludwig? I'm going to make lunch."

"Why were you moving things around?" Ludwig asked in the most careful of tones, stepping over a pile of old magazines to follow Feliciano into the kitchen. His blue eyes behind those glasses kept darting around, not missing a single detail. Feliciano's stomach rolled.

"To get ready for *you* , of course!" He dragged the attention back to himself. At least he could do that. "As you see, I didn't finish putting things back, because I got tired and hungry, but I figured that if we are going to be all domestic and everything" —he winked at Ludwig, and *there* it was again, that blush— "we may as well have a clean space for it."

“This is your attempt at cleaning,” Ludwig stated, his voice remaining devoid of emotion, to his credit.

Feliciano had already turned away and was inspecting the equally-unclean contents of his cabinets. “So, for lunch, do you like better: spaghetti or linguine?”

In the beginning, Feliciano had just liked the way Ludwig looked at him. First Ludwig’s ears would turn pink, then his cheeks, and by the time he glanced away his whole face would be endearingly rosy. Embarrassing him made Feliciano feel bad, but it was so easy he would do it even when he tried *not* to! And then, Ludwig was tall and smart and a good listener and...swole and everything. In the end, Feliciano decided he just liked Ludwig, no matter what terrifying game of cops-and-robbers and pretend they were being forced to play.

“Are you...going to eat?” Ludwig asked, breaking the silence. They were sitting at the tiny, tiny kitchen table in front of a heaping plate of pasta. (Spaghetti.)

Feliciano had been staring. “Oh. Yes, yes!” He shoveled a piping hot forkful into his mouth, then hissed at the burn. He gave Ludwig two thumbs-up and said over a full mouth, “Is not poisoned, I swear!”

Ludwig sighed. “I’ll take your word for it.” He dug in.

And the best part was that the food really *wasn’t* poisoned, either! Ludwig’s reaction was just that great as Feliciano waited for it. “This is good,” the FBI agent marveled quietly. His eyes flickered quickly up to Feliciano’s grin, then back down. “Um. Thank you.”

“Your new glasses make you look even more cute,” Feliciano told him, grinning wider.

Ludwig didn’t look up from the food. His shoulders squeezed together a little. “They are...not new,” he said, quieter.

“Oh, well, new to me.” Feliciano now studied them more. Next to the lens on Ludwig’s right side, the thickness of the frame reflected double the light from the weak kitchen incandescents, almost as if there was...another lens there. A different type of lens. One would easily miss it. The most miniscule chord of fear struck Feliciano’s heart, and he leaned in further to see better—

Ludwig sat up abruptly and put his fork down. “Let’s talk about you now. I noticed you have no landline phone at this house. Do you carry a cell?”

The fear in Feliciano’s heart curdled. “No,” he responded promptly. “I dropped it in a pot of boiling water and the rice trick did not work. Every part is broken, hah. Oops. Did I not tell you?”

For a second, Ludwig looked startled by the fact that he might already have known something Feliciano was just now telling him, but masked it with another calm face and carried on. “Isn’t it unsafe to not have a phone? What if you get hurt?”

Feliciano wished he had broken out the wine for this. “If the FBI is with me, why would I be getting hurt?” He gave a small, sharp smile. “Also I have my friends and neighbors.”

Ludwig simply nodded. “That is fair. You must be good at making friends and neighbors. Do you keep weapons?”

Feliciano folded his arms evenly, but under the table, he swung his feet back and forth. “We can protect each other without weapons.”

Ludwig gave him a level stare in return. “I am sure you do.”

The conversation continued until Monday, when Agent Beilschmidt returned. He carried with him a box of latex gloves and a trash bag. “Do you have a broom?” He asked by way of greeting, standing in the dirty doorway. “I would like to help you clean.”

Feliciano was slightly taken aback, as he wore only a house T-shirt and boxer shorts. He munched a cookie. “Oh, hello, Ludwig, *ciao!* I was just getting ready for naptime…”

“Then I can clean by myself while you sleep,” Ludwig decided, meeting him in the eyes. “May I enter?”

“Yes, please, you sexy blond vampire,” Feliciano yawned, tossing the door carelessly into its stop. Get his house cleaned for him *and* get a nap? It sounded glorious. He ate two more cookies, trotted off to his bedroom, tossed his shirt to the floor where he kept most of his clothing, put on a sleeping mask left behind by a certain someone that said in pink stitching *The Diva Is Out* , and slid under the covers.

He only realized his mistake after he rose from heavenly slumber two hours later.

Ludwig was sitting on the old sofa, sorting through the mess of Feliciano’s coffee table. Half the living room had been organized already, and the kitchen was spotless. Feliciano stalked over, sat down *on* the coffee table, crossed his legs, and put his hands on his hips. “Don’t you need a warrant for this?”

Ludwig looked up at him all innocent-like. “No, I don’t see why I would need one to clean.” Emphasis on *clean.*

But Feliciano only rolled his eyes. Tilted his head. “Okay, then.” He looked closer at the items Ludwig was examining. “Did you find anything, um, interesting, while you were cleaning?”

Ludwig leaned back slowly, setting down a colorfully covered DVD. “Just some...bad...films.”

He grinned. “Bad as in you do not like them or bad as in they are just not *good* films?”

“I will decline to answer that question,” the agent said, smartly.

Feliciano laughed. “You should see my sketchbook.” He moved to the couch, bouncing.

Ludwig let out the faintest of snorts. (Feliciano’s heart beat with glee at having made him almost laugh!) “Oh, I have already looked through that.” He ruffled through old copies of *Vogue* with his bright blue latex gloves, then moved on to the stack of travel guides and sun-faded notebooks. Studious and dangerous.

Feliciano couldn’t stop himself. He reached down and set his own hands on top of Ludwig’s, stopping the action. Ludwig didn’t say anything at first, just looked at him quizzically, those special glasses capturing everything in the room.

“Who is Gilbert?” Feliciano blurted out.

Ludwig tensed. “Where did you hear that name?” He carefully began to pull his hands away, but Feliciano held on.

“Is he your brother?” he insisted, venturing into the dark cloud of secrets.

“No. I’ve never heard that name in my life.”

“Oh, surely, it is not that uncommon a name!” Feliciano scooted closer. “Many people have brothers.”

Ludwig yanked himself away, hands and all. “You have a brother. In—In Italy.”

“In Italy,” he echoed, fiercely nodding. “Like you *made* me say in the interview. You *also* said a name Gilbert in the interview! That is why I was just *wondering* —”

“What does your brother *do* in Italy, exactly?” Ludwig asked. His voice was lower, though he didn’t sound angry like he had that day at the police station, just startled.

After a beat, Feliciano responded, “He is a farmer. He sells produce in Italy. Like me here.”

Ludwig shifted a little on the sofa, his gaze distant and stormy. He looked hot when he was thinking. Too bad Feliciano was too terrified to touch him again. “The family business,” Ludwig concluded.

“Yes,” Feliciano breathed out. *No!* “Wait, *no* , not like tha—”

“You know,” Ludwig thought aloud, reaching forward and taking *Feliciano’s* hand, “I think I would like to visit this produce farmer’s market you work at, again. Tomorrow.”

And so, on Tuesday, that was where Feliciano found them. Under the sweltering heat of the afternoon sun, dressed in aprons and more latex blue gloves, surrounded by fruit, vegetables, and customers alike.

Ludwig was a good worker—maybe even better than Feliciano. He got the hang of things quickly, and could lift more boxes of produce at a time. He worked alongside Feliciano like a shadow, and even took orders of his own, but Feliciano felt his eyes on his back whenever he made small talk with the visitors. They were mostly old ladies that called Feliciano “sweetheart” and euphorically described how these blueberries would taste in their famous, generations-old cobbler recipe, which Feliciano didn’t think sounded like suspicious Mafia talk to anyone, but he could never guess how Ludwig read it.

He was like a big, soft pretzel—lightly salted.

“We are running low on boxes,” he informed quietly, brushing past Feliciano to hand someone their change.

“There are probably more in the cellar,” Feliciano answered, absentmindedly checking his hair in the reflection of the windows.

“...Shall I get them?” Ludwig asked, nodding towards the big metal doors that marked the darkest corner of the inside part of the small building.

Feliciano perked to attention. “No, no, no!” He took a breath and stretched out his hands. “No, it’s okay! I will get boxes. You stay here.” He added in a smile to smooth things over.

Ludwig gave him a quizzical look, but offered up no further comments. At least he seemed more relaxed today. Feliciano had almost messed up big time. At least they had prepared for today.

So he left the FBI agent to his duties and carefully descended into the musk of the basement. Feliciano hadn’t been down in weeks, even though he worked here. No one used it—not even the real owner of the place. The cellar had been forgotten. Years ago someone had had the bright idea to put up tacky linoleum that clashed with the rows of old, broken refrigerators, and it smelled like someone was aging cheese in the rows of antique, spider web-covered jars that lined one wall. Feliciano didn’t venture off the stone steps down until he had secured a hand on the string that turned on the singular overhead light bulb. It coughed, sputtered, and with a whine, finally flickered on.

Lovino had forgotten to move the three chairs.

Feliciano wasted no time doing it himself, stacking the chairs and shoving them into the back of the room so it looked like they had been there a long time. Then he grabbed an armful of unused cardboard produce boxes, turned off the light, and dashed back up into the heat of the day.

“Here you go, Ludwig!” Feliciano gracefully tipped them into his hands.

“Ah, thank you.” Ludwig took the stack easily. “Another delivery of tomatoes just came in.” As if they were actual colleagues, actual partners. “Can you help me unload?” He looked so professional in those glasses.

“Of course.” Feliciano smiled a real smile this time. It felt good to forget they were part of an ongoing investigation and to do normal things that weren’t hacking or kidnapping or chasing false leads and suspicious speculations across the city. He and Ludwig created an assembly line from the back of the delivery truck, passing boxes of fruits down a line to the market. He made sure their hands touched every time.

“What is it like to work for the FBI?” Feliciano asked Ludwig on Wednesday. They sat in a booth at a somewhat high-end restaurant, empty plates and half-full glasses in front of them. Feliciano had used his entire Tuesday paycheck to pay for this, though Ludwig still insisted on picking up his own portion. It was getting late, and some local music act was setting up in the courtyard outside.

Agent Beilschmidt had retained his tranquil demeanor from yesterday. The drinks helped, undoubtedly; he was more open to talk than to interrogate. “It can be...a lot, sometimes. There is a lot of stress. Especially now. I—I haven’t been sleeping good.” He said this down at his silverware.

Feliciano had to remember to stop biting his tongue. *Careful, careful.* “I’m sorry. That must be so terrible. Is it my fault? I hope it is not my fault.”

Ludwig sighed. “No, it’s just… Ever since we moved, I have been working towards this. But lately I have been wondering…” He glanced around them, as if fearful a wild Elizabeta Héderváry was going to pop up from behind the bar. “I have been wondering if what I am doing is really right.”

Feliciano stared. “Me too.”

“Of course, it doesn’t matter. It is not my position to question… Well, it doesn’t matter. What is done is done.” He reached for his jacket, pulling it into his lap. “Are you ready to go?”

He nodded fiercely. “Thank you for the date tonight!”

Ludwig, as expected, was appalled. “Date? This is not a—a date.”

Feliciano held the door open, simpering. “Then what is it?”

Ludwig stepped carefully into the night. “A semi-formal business dinner.”

“You sound like you had that answer prepared,” teased Feliciano, following him down the street. “And that tie looks pretty formal to me!”

Ludwig was red, red, red. “You are under investigation!” he laughed out incredulously.

“So?” Feliciano snuck an arm around his waist. (A real laugh this time!)

“ *So,* ” Ludwig warned, gently brushing his arm away, “there would be trouble. I could get… You would…” He thought for a second. “Actually, I do not know what would happen.” He focused on something ahead, the street lights reflecting off of those damned glasses. “But I don’t want to wait to find out.” He straightened his posture and started to walk faster.

Feliciano jogged forward to keep up. “Hey, has it ever happened before? ‘Cuz if you guys really do *all this* to follow a case…”

Ludwig picked up the pace even more. The street was empty ahead of them; the metro station was near. “The consequences would be grave, I am sure.”

Feliciano ran ahead, throwing a grin over his shoulder. “I could really get us into trouble?”

“You’re already in trouble!” Ludwig shouted up as Feliciano gained ground. “Hey, what are you doing? Come back!”

“Catch me!” He burst into a sprint.

If Ludwig said anything next, it was lost to the wind, to the pounding of Feliciano’s heart. He already knew Ludwig couldn’t catch him. He wondered what would happen if he just kept running, forever, away from all his problems and duties, away from his brother, away from the men with the jackets, away from the man with the guns, away from the men with the computers. For the first time since he had stepped onto American soil, he felt truly free.

He sped into the metro station, inane giggles spilling over. Ludwig was sputtering somewhere behind him. Feliciano slowed to swipe his card, allowing Ludwig to catch up a little. The few locals that were out gave them confused glares as they tramped down the escalators. Feliciano spotted no trains in the station yet. *Good* .

He skipped right along the edge of the platform, slower, *slower,* allowing Ludwig to gain ground. He heard him puffing directly behind him. “Feliciano, what are you—”

Feliciano came to a dead halt and turned around. They smacked into each other. Due to a completely random, errant fling of Feliciano’s arm, the glasses on Ludwig’s face went flying, off the platform, magnificently through the air, and down, down, down onto the train tracks below.

Feliciano grabbed hold of Ludwig to keep his balance. “Oh!” He laughed loudly. “You caught me, wow!”

Ludwig completely ignored him, staring into the black abyss of the tracks. “My...glasses.”

“What?” Feliciano confusedly leaned over the side, past the yellow tape. He spotted them, cracked into two pieces, but resting neatly in the middle of the concrete floor. In two minutes they would be crushed to oblivion. “Oh my gosh! Your glasses! Oh my gosh, Ludwig, I am so sorry!”

Ludwig’s eyes were so wide. He looked to his glasses, looked to Feliciano, looked to the arrival and departure boards, the witnesses, and the sign that said in bold, commanding

authority DO NOT VENTURE ONTO TRACKS along with a helpful image that described his fate if he should do so. Helpless. “I needed those,” he stated simply.

“I am so sorry!” Feliciano repeated. “I should not have run. It is all my fault! Please forgive me, Ludwig! You can still see, right?”

He nodded slowly, still in a sort of shock. Feliciano was truly worried if he would be angry. “I can still see.”

Feliciano touched his arm softly. “I’m sorry.”

Ludwig kept nodding. “It’s okay.”

Feliciano curled his toes down in his shoes, shifting his weight back and forth. A rumble sounded from deep within the tunnels. “Do you still like me?”

Ludwig clenched his hand into a white-knuckled fist, but didn’t look mad. In fact, he didn’t look *anything.* He didn’t say anything, either. He just turned and faced the tunnel as the train rushed in, shattering his discarded glasses to smithereens.

“This is me,” Feliciano announced, quieter. “Goodbye, Ludwig. See you soon.” His heart was beginning to hurt, and he had sudden-onset regrets as he waited to step into the car.

“Goodbye, Feliciano,” Ludwig responded, just as quiet. Thoughtful.

And that was what gave it away. Feliciano plopped into an empty, smelly, hard-plastic seat. Had he messed up, somehow? Did Ludwig know something? They had been having so much fun! What a way to ruin the moment.

He could already hear himself being scolded. After all, he wasn’t supposed to be clever. Ludwig had watched him work, listened to his story, *searched* his *house* . It was a given that

countless mistakes had been made, by both parties. So maybe this was a different type of mistake.

Feliciano pulled his legs up and hugged his knees to his chest. His heart *ached* . He put his legs down and spread out his hands. He could not get comfortable. His heart *throbbed* . He turned around and watched Ludwig through the window as the doors closed and they began to move. His heart *cried* .

The consequences would be grave, indeed.

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The new room wasn't dark, smelly, or covered in spiders. It was carpeted, drywalled, trimmed, and completely empty except for them, their chains, and the new plastic folding chairs they sat in. It seemed like they had been shoved into the tiny closet of somebody's new house. And it was bright. Much brighter than the cellar.

" *¡Ay!* My *eyes* !" was the first thing Antonio said upon achieving consciousness. Francis had been right; he had a killer migraine.

"It is like the hangover without the pleasure of being drunk first," Francis was describing. "The friends without the benefits."

Antonio blinked twice. "I can't decide if I should take that as an insult or not, considering the quality of your *benefits.* "

" *Aaaaand,* I'm going to stop you right there," interjected an even paler-looking Gilbert. His chair was tilted so his face pressed against the wall, as if Lovino hadn't even bothered with keeping him upright. "Because I think I finally figured something out. I know what day it is."

“But, Gilbert, we just woke up!” Francis pointed out. “Any amount of time could have passed!”

Antonio didn’t care. Any information, at this point, would be useful to their sad, sorry situation. “What is it?”

Gilbert paused for dramatic effect, his scrunched-up face forming a smirk. “It is Wednesday, my dudes.”

“How do you know?” Francis questioned.

“Because I just heard that loud Italian complain through the wall that crappy hackers ruin everything and the three of us are shitting stupid and this is the worst Wednesday of his life.”

“You can hear him!” Antonio declared. “Anything else? Is he talking with someone else? What are they saying?”

Gilbert listened more, and it was quiet for a moment. “No, but I do hear police sirens somewhere.”

“Coming for us?” gasped Francis. “Is that bastard Arthur Kirkland finally going to stage a rescue attempt?”

They waited.

“No, they must be for someone else…”

Chapter End Notes

phonography - britney

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Hey, guys. Been sick. Better now. What's up. Long chapter. The story is officially halfway through. From here on out, we've entered the Wild, Wild West!

Which is sad because I have somewhat bad news: I'm taking a short break from writing this to focus on other summer obligations I have so far neglected. HAVE NO FEAR though because I've also officially finished the outline for the rest of this story, and—of course, you know me—I won't stay away for long. The updates will just probably be less frequent. Also I'm damn excited to finish this and to show y'all what's coming and I feel nasty leaving it at a cliffhanger like this.

Since posting the first chapter in the beginning of March, I've written 42k+ words in the span of 12 chapters, gotten 80+ comments/reviews (AO3 and FF combined) and thousands of views/hits, which may not sound like a lot compared to other stories, but it's more than I ever thought I would get when I started, and I'm nowhere near quitting. fbi: don't move even has a cringey pop playlist and a portfolio of wonderful art to its name (and by the way if you want to see some art I myself did, then hop on over to my tumblr as always)!

Anyway basically this could have never been done without you guys and I check every morning for reviews in excitement and I read them all curled in a tight little ball of love and joy and all you nice people out there supporting weird crap like this story mean the world to me and it's real late here so I'm keeping this short:

Watch your cameras for real this time. I shall return.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When they found him, he was knitting.

It was a little past midnight when the knock on the door came. He was sitting in the tiny kitchen, Yekaterina fast asleep on the sofa, Natalya using his bed. His hands shook the needles when he heard a rough, Spanish-accented voice say through the wood, "Open up. This is the police."

With all the remaining calm he could muster, he set down his yarn and rose. He stared at the door, frozen, feeling a wave of cold sweat wash over him. "Open up *now*, please." He took one step forward, his legs feeling like jelly, his heart not quite sure if it was supposed to be beating or not at this moment. "We will use force to enter if you do not comply." He moved.

Four officers were standing on his doorstep. The dreadlocked one in the middle was smoking a fat cigar, like something out of a movie. When he took it out to speak, he sounded friendly, despite the gravity his words held. "Ivan Braginsky, you are under arrest for the probable cause of hacking the United States government. Step on back inside, please, and get your hands where I can see them. We don't wanna make this difficult, okay?"

He took a step back as the officers entered. "No," he muttered, more to himself than to anyone else. His hands were forced into cuffs behind his back, and then he was being instructed to stand against the wall so he could be patted down. In his panicked state he struggled a little and got pushed and yelled at. When he heard an officer shout, "There's a woman in here!" from the living room, and then a yelp from Katya, he began to hyperventilate.

He didn't want to get caught. He didn't want to wear handcuffs or go to court or to prison. But most of all, he didn't want it to happen to his sisters. He tried to turn around and see what was going on.

Yekaterina was helpless, frightened, and confused. She shouted in her best broken English as the officer slowly led her into the kitchen, still in her pajamas, her hands in the air and her face streaked with grief as she saw Ivan. "What the hell is going on?" she whispered to him in Russian.

He didn't answer—only tried to swallow his stiffening tongue. *Where was Natalya?*

"Search the rest of the apartment," the cigar-smoking cop advised his friends. "The FBI guys will sweep by later, but if we find that computer…"

An officer flung open the bedroom door, and there stood his youngest sister, already posed with her hands in the air and her face giving away no fear. "He's innocent," she declared boldly. She was led out, as well.

Then they waited a few moments for the bedroom and bathroom to be searched. He knew he was done for. He hadn't hidden the laptop safely at all last night, and it could be easily seen if one only opened the cabinet under the sink. But low and behold, the officer emerged with a grim expression and a shake of his head, empty-handed. *What did it mean?*

The cigar-smoking cop finally faced him, scanning him up and down, and then nodding once. "All right. Listen up, Mr. Braginsky. The name's Carlos Machado. We're gonna take you down to the station now, and these ladies will come, too. Are they related to you?"

He didn't move. "They're innocent," he stated in Russian.

Carlos let out a little laugh. "Okay, okay, you're playing this game with me. I get it. Been there many times before. And don't worry; I hate Americans anyway. But there are some guys there that wanna see ya. Big guys. Important; you've caused quite a stir. So don't give us no trouble, okay, man? Okay. You have the right to remain silent, and anything you say can be used against you…"

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Toris picked Alfred up at six, and they drove through early morning traffic to the police station in a semi-awkward semi-silence.

"How's Felicks?" Alfred coughed out when it grew too unbearable. He was restless; he could never stand the silence. He knew Arthur Kirkland would be at the station, and Kiku, and that they had found the hacker(s) responsible for the breach. But after getting four hours of sleep the night before, he had worked himself up into a frenzy about why they hadn't yet told him anything. And what Matthew had to do with it. His own brother—turned against him.

Toris's face went red and his hands on the steering wheel went white. "Um. Felicks is fine, I guess."

Alfred fiddled with his belt buckle. It got jammed and he cursed, leaning back and running his hands through his hair. Finally: "You've been working here for a long time. Longer than me. Does he ever, like, talk to you?"

He caught Toris's glance in the mirror as he gulped. "No. Um. Do you mean that he...talks to himself?"

"Sure. Sure I mean that." Alfred stared ahead, willing the cars to go faster. His stomach was acting up again—that was how he knew it was bad. He knew that whatever lay ahead at the station wasn't gonna boost his rep. "Good golly. This is just hell, dude."

Toris nodded solemnly. "This job is very problematic. That is the reasoning it is top secret, I think. I think...I think that if Felicks really is a dealer on the—on the black market, at this point, there is nothing the US government or any other coalition of governments could do to

defend ourselves if we tried to prosecute him. For one, he would probably be too powerful. And we would be having trouble to explain ourselves—explain how we know. There would be outrage all around everywhere, and a fight. He is unethical; we are unethical. It is a circle with no end."

Alfred hadn't thought that deeply into it—their job situation—and felt a little stunned at the sudden revelation from a quiet coworker and a quiet friend he had known for so long. "Uh. You're not wrong, I guess, but, uh. I was actually talking about the road work ahead of us." He coughed. Now he looked dumb. "You know, like, 'I sure hope it does?'" Alfred almost gave him a friendly nudge to diffuse the tension but held off at the last second. "Like, 'I sure hope the road works? Ahead of us? Road...work?' Get it?"

Toris bit his lip. "The road is seeming fine to me."

"Yeah. Yeah, you know, it really is." He closed his eyes and let out a long, shuddering sigh through his nose. "Probably just the whale people. Your magnet, y'know." Alfred opened his eyes just in time to make more awkward eye contact with Toris in the mirror again, and at hearing about SAVE THE WHALES, he cringed away.

"Are you okay, Alfred?"

Alfred fidgeted again. All his words came out in the next breath: "Yeah, sorry, I'm just kind of fearing for my life? I have this gnawing, horrible dread that Arthur Kirkland is going to actually murder me and I hardly know why—I mean I kinda *do* know why, or at least suspect why—and all I wanted to do was help catch this hacker, but *no*, so now I'm here."

"But...Arthur likes you. You are his favorite," Toris claimed. And then he looked curious. "What exactly have you...done?"

The unnerving feeling that had been growing on Alfred perked to attention. He decided to not answer the question. "I'm just...anxious."

Toris nodded once. "I understand. It will pass; don't worry. It will be okay."

But, alas, it would not be okay.

They made it to the station. Alfred spotted the shared Ford in the parking lot and knew Matthew must indeed be here, carrying through with his promise from yesterday that *maybe we can talk again tomorrow morning at the station.* He swallowed the lump in his throat. He pretended to be here for only that reason. "I'm just here to see my brother," he breathed to himself as he and Toris slid into their FBI jackets. "Just here for Matt."

Toris tried to give him an encouraging smile as he held open the door and Alfred was hit with the AC and a cold sweat rush at the same time.

He tried to visit on a normal schedule, so he knew his way to Matt's office, but it turned out he didn't have to follow it. He spotted Matthew right there in the hallway, talking to another familiar-looking cop, and waved himself over.

"Hey! How's it goin'?" Alfred rushed out, putting on a smile. "I forgot the donuts."

Matthew perked up, and then laughed nervously. "Oh, hah. Hi. You—You did, eh?"

The other officer, the big Cuban named Carlos, let out an exasperated groan and slapped his hands over his face. "Oh, come on! You again? Could ya at least not stand next to him? It gets even harder to tell you two apart that way."

Alfred laughed good-naturedly, but not without injecting nerves into it, as well. Why was Matthew looking at Alfred like Alfred had just brought an olden-day pioneer curse upon the family name? "I'm wearing this huge-ass jacket, man! It says FBI in, like, neon yellow size one thousand font!"

Carlos shook his dreadlocks. "Well, don't go shovin' it in our faces now, big shot."

"Hey, if anyone, *he's* the big shot!" Alfred pointed at Matthew, who flinched. "Mr. Sheriff Supreme of DC and all, right?"

"He is *police*. Not sheriff," Carlos argued back.

"Oh yeah? Is there really a difference?"

Before it could escalate into a larger disaster, Matthew put his foot down. (He exhaled with slightly more force than normal and the conversation ground to a halt.) Slowly, he gave Carlos a polite nod, and Toris one as well. Then, cautiously, he turned to Alfred. In the smallest voice manageable he said, "I think that you are needed elsewhere at the moment."

Alfred's stomach dropped at the same time Carlos turned away and scoffed, "That's about right. Tell him."

"Tell him what, Matt?" Alfred questioned, laughing nervously again. "I thought I came to…"

He trailed off as Matthew gave him a tense smile and pointed behind him, down the hall. Therein lay Chief Arthur Kirkland of the black division.

"Top of the morning, Alfred!" he exclaimed, in a more jovial tone than normal, but Alfred could spot the murder in his eyes from a mile away. "How are you? And good day, Toris."

Toris looked unsure if nodding back was the correct option. "Hello."

"Hello indeed." Kirkland's smile was razor sharp. "Have you done any work so far this morning?"

"Just a few minutes," Toris answered obediently. "Everything looks normal."

"Oh, but let's be reasonable. I was referring to *him.*" Arthur extended a palm to Alfred. "Our trusted young Agent Jones here. Alfred, have you done any work?"

Normally Alfred had no problems with being the sudden center of attention. But here, right now, today, in this economy? He was faltering. "I. Have not yet."

"Right." Arthur Kirkland kept nodding and nodding. "Right. And I'm going to correctly assume you hadn't done any work late last night, either."

"But you caught the hacker, didn't you," Alfred interrupted. "I figured that out at least. And they're...here?"

"Yes, we caught our bloody hacker." The chief turned to Carlos and Matthew. "And, by the way, he's still not talking. Hasn't even mentioned about wanting lawyer. The women are still unstable; they won't leave the side of the cell and tell me they don't speak English."

Carlos tsked. "Can't blame 'em."

Alfred shifted. "Who is it? The hacker? Is Kiku here?"

Arthur turned back to face Alfred fully. "Yes, Mr. Honda is here. He's already identified the subject in question, so now it's your turn. Maybe you can help him find his words for us."

"Wait, what? How can *I*…" He let the sentence hang, staring at everyone and coming to the full realization that he was right. Everyone knew what was going on except for him. "Fine. I wanna see."

Kirkland nodded cheerily. "Oh, you don't have a choice. You're *going* to see. Come."

Alfred considered whether he should disobey and make a run for it. Obviously he was in trouble, but Arthur insinuating Alfred could somehow help the hacker "find his words for us?" Something didn't add up, and whatever that something was scared him. He squeezed his hands and followed his boss down the corridor, Toris and Matt behind him.

"Right this way," Arthur said, holding open a door when they arrived in the holding cell area. He was no longer wearing a pretend smile or speaking mirthfully. "Go in and see for yourself."

And so Alfred went in, and he saw.

He had watched years of movies where the slow-motion effect was used, but hadn't felt it himself quite like this. Everything was sluggish. First he saw the floor, and the metal bars stretching between it and the ceiling, and then he saw the two ladies whispering in the corner, and then he saw what he was meant to see, standing in the cell. The man looked utterly defeated: his broad shoulders slumped, his downy blond hair falling into his face, his eyes—those beautiful purple-blue eyes—downcast. Until they were rising, and rising, and meeting Alfred's own.

For just one moment things didn't quite connect and Alfred excitedly blurted out, "Ivan!"

For just one moment—"Alfred!"

And then time stood still.

Those eyes of Ivan's eyes went wide, and he slapped a hand over his mouth at the same time Alfred took a step back. The tide of realization swept over them and washed them out. Alfred

forgot to breathe. This was the reason Matthew looked afraid of him, and the reason Kiku hadn't said a word to him, and the reason Arthur was going to actually murder him. Ivan was the Russian spy. And Alfred—Alfred in his suit and jacket and glasses—Alfred was the FBI spy.

He could see the dots connecting in Ivan's own mind as well, as the man seemed to begin to shudder as he pointed a single accusatory finger through the cell bars. Alfred hadn't realized he had been pointing, himself. He turned quickly back to Arthur, looking for an explanation, or assurance that this was just a dream, but the chief was silent and frowning. Alfred met Ivan's eyes again and whispered, "How?"

Ivan's features twisted into an expression Alfred had not once seen him wear before. Nothing like the soft smiles in the park or even the complacent face he wore when scrolling through his phone in the late afternoon or early morning. "*Ty solgal mne.*"

But Alfred had to be defensive. "You lied to *me*, too! What...what *is* this?"

Ivan surged forward, clutching the bars between his fists. "*Ty govorish' po-russki! Ya znal eto!*"

"What's he saying," uttered Kirkland.

Alfred ignored him. He felt hot all over, and not the good kind of hot he used to feel in Ivan's presence. It was a frustrated, embarrassed, confused and angry kind of hot. A hot that made part of him want to forget this was happening, grab Ivan, move to Alaska, and become humble fishermen...and the other part of him want to walk away now, leave Ivan behind bars, and see him later in court. It was what a hacker deserved. A Russian spy. An enemy of the FBI, of the United States. *A criminal. A liar.* Alfred shook his head, trying to clear it.

"Why did you do it?" he interrogated, stepping forward. His voice was trembling and rising in volume, but he had no control. "Why in hell did you think you could… How did you do it?"

"How did you learn Russian?" Ivan countered, in Russian. "All this time you were behind my back? Against me?" He snarled. "Why did *you* do it?"

Alfred shook out his shoulders. "Cut it out, man! You're a traitor!"

Ivan squeezed the bars. "No! You're the traitor! You did this to me! I trusted you!"

"Bullshit! You're a—you're a crook! A felon! And you went into this *knowing* that!" Why, oh, why did this have to happen to them? Why couldn't they just be normal people?

Arthur stepped forward. "Jones, will you—"

Alfred hadn't known what he had been about to say, but cut him off anyway, moving closer to the cell. The rest of the world had faded away. "Hell yeah I will! Ivan, what the fuck? You should be sent back home! Back to Russia for this! *Holy*— That's the reason you came, isn't it? Isn't it!"

"You don't know anything about me." Ivan's eyes narrowed. "You never knew anything, did you? Is that why you approached me? I just thought you were cute and wanted to talk to you, but you wanted to destroy me! I never wanted to target you! I didn't know! You took advantage of that!"

Alfred couldn't process this all at once. He fell back, waving his hands. The things he had felt about Ivan, all of the wonderful emotions, were frozen in place like a deer in headlights, unsure of what to do now. "I can't believe you on this! You realize that, right? You realize what you've done? I can't believe anything you say, or ever said! You're sick and manipulative! For all I know, this was your plan the whole time!"

"Shut up, you stupid American! You never shut up! You're wrong and corrupt and you keep secrets and you hurt! These things you are saying hurt!" Ivan shook the bars, his face growing crimson. God, it *hurt* just looking at him.

Alfred was almost at a loss for words. He winced. "You're the one who's wrong. I never tried to hurt you or take advantage of you, Ivan."

Ivan let go of the bars, but his fists stayed clenched. "I was prepared to leave my house in the middle of the night to come hug you. I was so scared, but I was prepared to take you to meet my sisters just so we could watch the movie together. I was prepared to do all these things for you. I was even going to tell you that I lo—"

He closed his eyes, knowing he had to interrupt. "None of that means anything anymore. You have to realize that." This was hard, so hard to say. Alfred wished he was in Alaska. "You did something bad, Ivan, so now you're going to have to—"

His world turned on a dime. Alfred had forgotten that he was in a room surrounded by people and witnesses who had been listening to the entire half-Russian, half-English conversation, and now his glasses were on the floor and a bright red pain was flaring across his cheek. Alfred looked up. Ivan's youngest sister stood there—Natalya was her name? And she had slapped him.

There was a second of silence just like before, and then everyone was shouting and moving. Alfred felt someone drag him backwards, and then Matthew had a hand on his chest and was stepping in front of him, barking out, "Everybody please be calm!" Natalya was screaming at Arthur in no discernable language, Yekaterina was pressing her arms through the prison cell bars in an attempt to hold her brother, and Carlos had one hand on where his gun rested.

"Stop this," Alfred muttered dizzily. He was only watching Ivan. Ivan had begun to cry. Alfred's heart fractured.

Toris, surprisingly but not surprisingly, was the first to raise his voice and come to a clear conclusion. "I think it would be best if we separate."

Arthur Kirkland turned and threw Alfred a look. "Do you see now, Jones?"

Alfred cursed at him.

The Chief didn't like that. "That's it. Toris is right. We're leaving. If you have any more words to say to your conniving 'gardener' boyfriend, well, they might be your last."

"Get you a man who can do both, I guess," Alfred scoffed pathetically. Albeit...he couldn't bring himself to want to leave Ivan. There was still so much they hadn't covered. Alfred was confused and lightheaded, and he wanted more of an explanation before Ivan was sent off to who knew where. Seeing Ivan sniffling made Alfred feel terrible shame, but he didn't think he was the one to blame. Ivan had betrayed him, and could have been using him all along. Though it didn't seem that way and was never supposed to seem that way, Ivan was...dangerous.

Matthew led him carefully out of the room, and Alfred felt his heart break.

Carlos stayed to calm the sisters, but the moment the rest of the party made it to Matt's office, Alfred's interrogation began. Arthur had even snagged a recording device, and positioned it on the desk as he directed Alfred to a chair.

"I ain't sayin' nothing," Alfred stubbornly relayed at first, hunkering down into a little ball of sadness.

Kirkland opened his mouth. "Agent Alfred F. Jones, I will *fire* you if—" And he was halted by a knock on the door. He slammed his fist against the table. "Damn these repeating intrusions!"

"My sincerest apologies," Kiku said, lightly pushing the door open. "I was looking for Alfred, and I saw...hello, Alfred."

A wheeze. "Hey, man."

Arthur ushered Kiku in with some hand waving, and then locked the door behind them. "He's about to have the shit questioned out of him, so we're glad you could join us."

Kiku looked from one man to the other, nodded a bit shakily, and sat down next to Toris with his hands folded.

Matthew was murmuring to himself. "Chief, I don't know if we can do this now according to the law."

But Arthur Kirkland was a force unstoppable. "We are the law! Even if, I don't really care. I want to hear the truth, and I want it from him." He directed his piercing gaze toward Alfred. If Alfred had thought he looked menacing before, that was nothing compared to this. "Start from the beginning."

Alfred readjusted his position, sighing once, and then again, his throat dry and his brain running wild. His stomach felt like it was bouncing, but he was sitting still. It was too hot in this room. Ivan was locked in a cell crying somewhere down the hall. "I can't. It's too much."

"You can and you will," Arthur stated, but less bold this time.

Alfred's glasses had been picked up and given to him before leaving the holding room, but he hadn't yet put them on because his head hurt too much. He set them on the desk and leaned back, staring at the ground. "We've met before, okay? Is that what you want? Saw him at the park a couple of times. We've texted and stuff. That's it."

Matthew's voice was soft. "You were talking about him when I picked up the truck that one time, weren't you."

Alfred nodded, but said nothing more about the romantic side of his and Ivan's relationship. It seemed like a happy, faraway dream he couldn't bear to think of yet.

Kiku leaned forward and gave him a gentle look. "And were you going to tell someone about it?"

Alfred let his shrug fall all the way down to the armrests. "Maybe."

"What kinds of things did you tell Ivan?" Arthur asked.

He felt his face burning pink. It seemed like he couldn't get enough air to breathe to speak with, but having his friends there being nice did help. He tapped his fingers against his thighs, staring at the nature photos of beavers and polar bears tacked to the wall. "I don't know. Memes and stuff. He—he thought I worked at NASA."

Arthur raised his eyebrows at that. "So that's what that was in there? He didn't know who you really were?"

Alfred nodded, rubbing his eyes. "I did lie to him. God, I'm horrible."

Toris asked in a meeker voice, "So you didn't give away any government secrets to him."

"No," Alfred answered. "Never, not that I'm aware of." He felt his legs going weak and looked at Matt pleadingly. He needed out of here now or he was going to fall apart.

Chief Kirkland set his jaw and came to a more level tone. "That's better to hear. And you're sure of this? But you don't know if he ever took advantage of you. We could still be compromised. What else happened...between...you and him?"

Matthew came to the rescue. "Let's save the rest of the questions for later, okay?" He sent a knowing look at Arthur. "We'll have plenty of time once we figure out Mr. Braginsky's charges and organize some lawyers, and his apartment needs to be searched. The laptop computer and cable he's alleged to own weren't found."

So there was *a computer*. Alfred, in the midst of an anxiety overflow, now wondered how he had never seen it during all those times he watched Ivan. Was it dumb luck, or had Ivan known Alfred was watching him and had purposefully not used his laptop in the presence of his phone? Would that explain the "Mr. FBI" dilemma? He fumbled around for his glasses and sent a grateful glance to his brother.

"So be it." Arthur didn't set his eyes in Alfred's direction again. He pressed STOP on the recording device. "I'm going to work now and will investigate further into the situation.

Thank you for your time, gentlemen." He gave each of them a handshake, skipping Agent Jones, and left the room.

Toris soon reluctantly followed, but Kiku and Matthew stayed. Matthew gave a long exhale, and folded over some papers before meeting Alfred's gaze. "Let's get you home, then. We'll take the truck."

"We will help you through this," Kiku put in, leaning forward. "I know you are not the type to betray your country. Mr. Braginsky will be put to justice."

Alfred gulped down a sob. "Thanks, you guys." But he didn't feel as grateful as he should have been. If someone as close and kind and thoughtful as Ivan could be a liar and a traitor, anyone could be.

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"It was an accident," Ivan managed over the tears. "I fell in a hole, and now I owe so much to them. I would never have done it myself. I promise. I love the both of you so much, and...and…"

"*Shhh*," Yekaterina was saying, combing through his hair from behind the bars. "It will be okay." But there was fear in her eyes, just like there had been fear in Alfred's eyes and in Ivan's own eyes. Trust didn't exist anymore.

"I believe you," Natalya stated, holding his hand. "It is not your fault."

"It *is* my fault," Ivan whispered, then choked on another gasp.

"No! It's that FBI man's fault, isn't it?" she continued, determined. "Whoever he is, he's to blame. Not you. I just know it. Don't worry at all, Ivan. We'll get you out of here, right Katya?"

"Yes," said Katya, distantly. "You'll come home safe and sound." She placed a kiss on Ivan's forehead.

The door opened, and the police officer from before placed his hands on his hips. "I need the two women for questioning now."

"He says they need to speak to you," Ivan relayed.

Natalya and Yekaterina dragged themselves to their feet. "We're going to fight this," Natalya stated. "When we're done, we'll make sure the FBI will pay for it."

Ivan gulped, and then they were gone.

It was easier to cry with no one watching, so Ivan compressed himself onto the tiny holding cell cot and bawled into the pillow. He was ashamed of himself, angry at the police, furious at Alfred, scared for his sisters, and terrified for the future. He had no backup now, and barely a clue how this justice system worked. He was completely alone once more. Home, safe and sound, was now both literally and metaphorically hundreds of miles away.

Chapter End Notes

liar - britney

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lol i'm uploading chapter 13 on friday the 13th

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so what up punks did you miss me

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alfred: hey, um. i know you won't see this. but if you ever do i just want you to know that i'm sorry i lied to you. i had to to protect my job. all my feelings were real though. i didn't lie to u about that.

Traitor .

Alfred sniffled and deleted everything he had typed. Talking to Ivan would have been easier than messing with all this writing mumbo-jumbo, but talking wasn't exactly an option at the moment. Ivan was probably asleep in a police cell across the city right now. And Alfred was huddled in a blanket fort in his living room, alone at two in the morning, and trying not to cry.

Manipulator .

Matthew had taken him home after the incident at the station, and they had talked for a long while about what to do. Matt had repeatedly apologized, even at Alfred's behest that *he* should be the one apologizing, and then they had talked some more about other things related to Alfred and Ivan. Alfred had almost cried then. Later, Matthew had informed that a search crew had found Ivan's phone, but still not the laptop.

Hacker .

The women—Ivan's sisters—had been released after they had found a translator and represented themselves innocently in their interview. The last Alfred had heard, they were getting a hotel and a lawyer. Alfred didn't want to have to testify in court. Like Toris had said—there would be outrage everywhere.

Spy .

It suddenly hit Alfred that, now that Ivan's phone was in custody, it would be searched. If Ivan hadn't deleted the texts between them, then anyone who looked would see just how close he and Ivan had been. All the heart emojis, the late-night FaceTiming sessions, the *good morning* s and *goodnight* s. So it didn't matter now if Alfred texted Ivan anything. In frustration, he groaned and chucked his phone against the wall outside the blanket fort.

Criminal.

A snap, crackling and popping noise.

"Shit!" Alfred exploded out of the fort, running over to where his phone now sat on the ground. The screen was shattered. He tried to turn it on and only got a blank jumble of light. " *Shit!* "

Felon .

Angry tears rushed down his face. He hadn't meant to do it. He hadn't meant to do any of it.

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Ivan cried and he cried and he cried and he cried, and when he got done crying, he squeezed the damned holding cell pillow for seven minutes. He had never felt this stressed and helpless in his life. Someone had given him meals—turkey and cheese sandwiches and chocolate milk—and tried to interrogate him again, but he ate nothing and said nothing the entire day. They had given him a soft T-shirt and pants to change into from his pajamas; Ivan had looked to the camera in the corner and became shy. Alfred hadn't come back. His sisters hadn't come back. Now the cell was dark, and Ivan had no idea what time it was.

If Alfred had lied about his job, what else had he lied about? Ivan shivered just imagining it. Surely their whole relationship hadn't been fake…? Alfred had shared a lot with him in just a couple of weeks. But FBI officers were known to be ruthless, and to do anything to catch their prey—or at least that's what Ivan had gleaned from movies and the criminal-half of his life. Maybe "Alfred" didn't even exist. Maybe he was just an actor and had simply molded out the perfect character for Ivan to like.

But Ivan was not to be discredited. He had kept his identity as a hacker locked away tight. While Alfred had slipped up a couple of times now that Ivan thought back on it, Ivan was sure he hadn't. Maybe he had shown a weakness or two, but there was no way Alfred had known about his secret equipment. Obviously, if the emails from the circle hadn't been enough to lead him on, the FBI had found Ivan out through his little escapade at the Natural History museum. But he had seen Alfred before that, and Alfred had lied to him before that.

The only conclusion was that the FBI had somehow been tracking Ivan for a long time, probably just sitting on their asses *waiting* for him to make a mistake. And a mistake, he had made, indeed. He shivered again, wishing the blanket was thicker or the bed was softer. Or—maybe it would be better to die of hypothermia right now than to face what lay ahead. Ivan had a feeling he was going to have to start getting used to jail cells.

It had seemed so real between Alfred and he. It had just seemed so real. Ivan had never been with anyone like Alfred before. He should have just found a way to defect from the hacker group, somehow, and let the dream never end.

Ivan began to tear up again. He felt annoyed with himself now more than anything that he was being such a baby. He had known it would be tough going into this whole thing, and Alfred hadn't been wrong about that, so he should have just sucked it up and been strong while he still could.

Ivan cried himself to sleep.

He didn't have much of a nightmare as he had had the night before—just visions of his sisters and Alfred flashing through his mind. They were good visions, too: Alfred in sunglasses under the Washington Monument the first day they had met, Natalya ogling a jellyfish, Yekaterina sticking her arm into the basin next to the Jefferson Memorial. Alfred, kissing his cheek. His sisters snuggled close to him, fast asleep on the couch after watching hours of

their favorite childhood movies. In his dream, Ivan subconsciously thanked his subconscious for letting him have these memories when he needed them the most.

" *Ivan Braginsky!* "

He stirred awake, moaning into his pillow. For a second he forgot where he was, and when the realization dawned he moaned again. The room was pitch-black save for a thin rectangle of light coming from the open door on the other side of the bars. A small frame stood there in contre-jour. " *Ivan Braginsky!"* it whispered again. Ivan could guess the unidentified young man had been calling his name for a while.

"Who are you?" Ivan responded first in Russian, and then repeated himself in English, but the person was already waving his hands.

"No time to explain!" he hissed, moving forward. He extracted something from behind his back and began fiddling with the lock on the cell. Ivan perked up. "We need to move quickly!"

"What's going on?" Ivan didn't move, his hand clutching the bedsheet. "It's nighttime! Are you a police officer? What is this?"

The lock sprang and the young man threw open the door. "No, I'm from SAVE THE WHALES. And this is a jailbreak."

Ivan's stomach dropped. " *What* ."

"Come, quickly!" The small intruder didn't touch Ivan, but got close enough to beckon him. Then he began backing out. Ivan tensed.

"What happens if I come with you?" *Do I want to do this?* He wanted answers before he broke the law *again* , but the guy was already walking out the door.

“I can promise you safety, security, and an explanation,” he called back to Ivan. His face became visible in the light of the hall as he checked both ways, and Ivan realized he recognized him vaguely. He wasn’t wearing a promotional T-shirt and carrying an armload of fliers, but the apprehension in his eyes and the curl of his light brown hair was enough to give away that their paths had crossed before, only days ago. He whispered, “I—I know who you really are, and what you’ve done.”

He *had* known Ivan’s name. Ivan gulped. “Tell me your name first.”

“You can call me Raivis,” he said. “Now, come on. Let’s hurry!”

Ivan shook the stars from his head, prayed a little, stood up, and went with him.

They power-walked down the hall. The station seemed empty, the lights dimmed and not a cop in sight. Ivan only looked at the cameras through his periphery; if this was a real jailbreak they would have to have already been taken care of, but he was still frightened. He tried to walk as silently and as swiftly as Raivis, hoping to everything that he hadn’t made the wrong decision.

They emerged into the night, and Raivis closed the back door behind them. A van was waiting outside, the SAVE THE WHALES logo painted across its flank. The dusk lights, the cool breeze and the insect noises were, admittedly, a delight to Ivan. He was ushered into the back of the vehicle, and Raivis soon followed suit, motioning to the driver. Just like that, they were off.

“How is this happening?” Ivan whispered, fumbling with his seatbelt. “I thought SAVE THE WHALES was a peaceful group.”

Raivis’s face was lit in strobe as they passed streetlights outside. He nodded, then shook his head, jittery. He kept the conversation in Russian. “They—They are. But...certain members agree to favors when I ask. I guess I’m respected with them, you see? Well...they don’t know who you are. They think you’re just my friend.” He nodded subtly towards the driver, who glanced back at them.

“Just droppin’ off at your place, right?” the woman asked in regular American English.

“Yes,” Raivis responded. “Thanks so much.”

Ivan was starting to feel panicked. He didn’t know this person. He didn’t know what he wanted, or who he was really affiliated with—yet Raivis seemed to know all about him. Why had he agreed to this? If he were caught now...he didn’t even want to think about the repercussions. “Then who are you really?” He forced himself to look brave. “Tell me now or I will stop this car.”

Raivis’s eyes went wide. “No, wait, please! When we get there it will all make sense. I swear I’m on your side, Mr. Braginsky!”

Ivan considered if squeezing the kid would make him spit it all out in a clearer fashion, but then decided better of it. “How do you know who I am?”

The rescuer gulped. “From...online. I know about your...skills. Please don’t hurt me or try to stop the car, sir! We rescued you because we need you!”

Ivan was about to ask who was “we,” but then he gasped. “‘Online’...you mean you are a hacker, too. You are from the circle.”

One, two seconds of fear passed. And then Raivis tentatively nodded.

Ivan’s blood ran cold. That didn’t make him feel any safer. “Where are you taking me?”

“To the others,” Raivis all but whimpered. “Like I said, we can explain everything.”

Ivan sat back, blowing out a breath containing all his misgivings. He wished for his scarf; it had been taken from him when he had changed. He wasn't sure how to feel about these sudden proclamations. So many secrets. The hacker circle was here now, and had taken matters into their own hands by busting Ivan out of jail and driving him via SAVE THE WHALES cover to their headquarters? There was definitely a grand scheme behind this. What did they really want? This was spoopy.

Several minutes later, the party made it to their destination: an apartment complex on the seedy side of town. Ivan looked up at it with disdain as Ravis led him inside. Maybe Raivis was lying, and had ulterior motives bringing him here. Ivan clenched his hands into fists and prepared himself for what was to come.

They ended up on the fifth floor, in front of a locked door which Raivis amended with a key, and then they were in. Ivan braced himself, ready to see heavily-armed soldiers in suits, panels of futuristic-looking computers and machines, or maybe even an FBI agent. He was confused when he saw what appeared to be a normal kitchen/living room space, complete with a TV playing a late-night soap opera and pizza cooling on the counter.

"You're back." Someone popped their head up over the couch. "Oh, *shit* . You brought the big boy."

"Hi," squeaked out Raivis, locking the door behind them. "Meet Ivan."

Ivan subconsciously shifted his shoulders, trying to cover the scars on his neck and get a good look at the new people at the same time. The previous speaker who had dubbed him "big boy" swung their legs over the side of the couch and plodded over cautiously, glaring at Ivan with suspicious green eyes. They wore a sort of light pink robe and had a messy bob of short blond hair. They paused a few paces in front of Ivan and gave him the up-and-down.

Ivan stiffened and asked Raivis, "Who is she?"

The robe-wearing person looked assaulted. "Uh, do I *look* like…?"

Raivis gulped and tried for a smile. “Ivan, this is Felicks. He helps supply us with equipment. Ask him for anything, and he has connections all over that can get it. He is the ruler of the market, and the reason you own your laptop and cable.”

Illegal equipment, then . He narrowed his eyes back at Felicks as Felicks continued glaring, already not vibing with his general energy. But instead of breaking out into a fight, Felicks eventually began to go red in the face and looked away, retreating into himself. “Well, it is easy to let the weapons and the money do the talking.”

Felicks then eyed the pizza, whipped out a knife from a hidden pocket, and sliced himself another piece. Instead of being impressed or scared, Ivan looked at the pizza and was only reminded of how he had skipped eating yesterday and was therefore absolutely famished.

“Could I have some?” he asked meekly. It smelled so good, and it didn’t look like the kind of pizza that came from a box...

“Sure!” Raivis perked back up, taking Felicks’s knife and going to work. “Lovino just made this! He is another person you need to meet. Lovino Vargas. Is he here now?”

Felicks dripped tomato on his robe. “Yeah, but he is asleep. I don’t want to wake the bitch. Angry when tired, but I guess he is angry at something, like, all the time.” He pointed to a cozy chair in front of the TV.

Ivan then noticed the other figure sitting hidden in the shadows. “Lovino” was a dark-haired, short and good-looking young man, wearing only underwear as he dozed.

“He looks familiar,” Ivan mumbled. “I think maybe I have bought vegetables from him a couple of times.”

“No, that was probably his younger brother,” explained Raivis, handing over the pizza slice. “Feliciano is...well...I do not think you will meet him any time soon. He is kind of undercover right now; it’s a sort of complicated situation but I can explain later if you really want to know or maybe Lovino can but I wouldn’t ask him now because he might stab you. Basically, they are both hired from the Italian Mafia to work with us.”

Ivan bit into the pizza. It was the most heavenly thing he had tasted in a long time, mafia or no. “Oh,” was all he uttered.

Raivis smiled a little, calming down just a smidge. “Good, right? Amazing. I mean—if you don’t like it it’s fine, that’s your opinion, but I know I for one am glad we all live together. That’s my opinion!”

“And you mix a mother-ass good drink for a teenager!” Felicks called.

Raivis blushed. He...did look no older than eighteen. They all looked pretty young—Ivan’s age, give or take a few years. In the midst of a sensational pizza daze, he wondered how in the world *these* people came to be who they were. So far they seemed like a mixed bunch. “Is this all of you?” Ivan inquired.

“You have not met our true tech mastermind yet,” Raivis answered, but after him and Feliciano, I guess this is pretty much us! We are not all hackers, but this is our little circle.”

Ivan almost dropped the pizza. “ *Five* people?” Less than that if they weren’t all hackers? Less than five people had been controlling his life ever since he had plunged into the dark web and accumulated endless debt, a time that seemed like centuries ago?

“Well, really six, if you, like, want to count…” Felicks trailed off at Ivan’s gaping mouth. “Never mind. Creepy Russian.”

“How about we let you meet Eduard?” Raivis suggested before Ivan could be dragged out of the slightly-less-stressed-than-before mood the delicious pizza had put him in. “Everything with tech and computers...that is all him. Eduard Von Bock. He’s great at it, if you consider hacking great, but I guess we have to. His room is down the hall.”

The hall was tiny and only had three rooms branching off of it, plus a bathroom. The entire apartment, it seemed, was undecorated, and in many places Ivan spotted cardboard boxes filled with random items, like the group had bought this place on a whim and had wanted to

save completely moving in for another day. In fact, after seeing enough evidence Ivan decided it was safe to assume the exact thing had occurred. He paused when he heard some noises coming from behind one of the closed doors that sounded like human snoring.

“Who is here?” he asked, stopping. The door had five different bolts on it.

“...More of Lovino’s business,” Raivis said. “Come on, Eduard is right this way.”

They came to the end of the hall and Raivis knocked in a swift pattern before opening the door.

Inside, the only light came from the three computer screens at the desk and numerous glowing bulbs on accompanying electronic boxes. A slim, blond man in a dress shirt and pajama pants spun around in a wheely chair when they entered, his hands folded. His expression was complacent, but Ivan couldn’t see beyond the glare of his glasses. He nodded once. “We’ve been waiting for you, Mr. Braginsky. I am so glad you could make it.”

Ivan frowned. He was growing tired of this. “Please just tell me what you want already or I will smash all your silly little computers and leave.”

Eduard’s shoulders jumped and he gave a shaky nervous laugh. “Cutting right to the chase, I see! Okay. Um, sit down please. Unfortunately I have some bad news… Er, Raivis, does he already know who I am?”

Raivis nodded.

“Does he know we are the circle? And the others?”

Raivis nodded.

“And about Mr. Jones…?”

Ivan cut in. “You know Alfred? I knew it! You are just like him!”

Eduard laughed again. His voice got higher every time Ivan spoke, and he fidgeted more. “Oh, boy. You are not wrong...but. See...how do I break it to you? Um. We are spies. You are a spy with us. Mr. Jones is *not* with us, but…he is also a spy.”

Ivan crossed his arms, growling. “Explain.”

Eduard crossed his legs, uncrossed them, and then looked at Raivis. His glasses brighted Ivan again. He began. “Mr. Braginsky, I am not from here, just like you. None of the people in this apartment are from Washington, but we all came to Washington for a very specific reason. We might be hackers and dealers and criminals, but we found out not long ago that there are bad people here doing worse than us...in higher places.”

“The US government, per se,” Raivis squeaked out.

Ivan breathed slowly. “Continue.”

Eduard did. “We formed this task force because we—and who knows how many others—were and are being targeted through illegal, immoral means. Here is what we have learned. A few years ago, the FBI added two new top secret divisions, nicknamed the gray and black divisions. They work closely together, spying on suspected criminals like us. While the gray division is made up of field agents who go undercover and hunt down targets, the black division is made up of hackers just like you, except the way *they* spy is different.”

Raivis’s eyes were lit up in a passion. “Personal technology.”

“Everyone has a cell phone. What a better database to reach billions?” Eduard’s voice had dropped to a grim low.

“The black division of the FBI spies on their targets through their cell phones?” Ivan questioned. Then, in surprise, he let out a laugh. “But that meme is dead!”

Silence in the control room.

Slowly, the gravity of the situation dawned on Ivan as the excitement died down and the hackers blinked away from his gaze. They were right. It was a horrible breach of privacy, and made even worse that a government organization was doing it. But even when it had been a meme, Ivan had never really felt bothered or disgusted. With so many people in the world and so much technology, a part of Ivan had laughed it off along with his account followers, assuming that there would just always be some mystery out there he would never understand. (He wondered faintly what his account would come to in his absence.) And even when Ivan had started talking to his phone, when things had gotten too real—

Ivan swallowed a lump. He had forgotten, hadn’t he. He had let the meme get the best of him. He *never* forgot.

“Mr. Jones is also a spy, you said,” he stated bluntly at the sorrowful faces of two international criminals he had known for less than two hours, but, now that shit had hit the fan, he felt he should at least listen to, because there wasn’t really anyone else he could trust anymore in his life. “So Alfred is FBI. And if I am right and the FBI has been tracking me for a long time, they have been tracking me this way. So, Alfred…”

The words died on his lips as he heaved out a shudder. He finally leaned against the wall and curled into himself, not wanting to finish his sentence or believe it, but Eduard and Raivis looked too solemn for them to deny what they all knew. Goosebumps washed over him, and after a few seconds, he let out a little sob. So Alfred really was just as horrible as the back of Ivan’s mind had wanted to believe he wasn’t. Alfred had known his name. Alfred had spoken Russian to him. Alfred had *watched* him through his phone, probably texting him nice things at the same exact time. *Alfred, Alfred, Alfred.*

Ivan barked out another laugh. Mr. Jones was Mr. FBI.

“I will destroy him,” he uttered.

“Bring him to justice,” Eduard cautiously corrected, beginning to do his annoying little jittering thing again, “with, um, our help. Your backup already has a foothold on the FBI, and so does the Mafia. We know that in two days the FBI will tear your apartment from top to bottom, so we need to be sure that laptop you have is long gone. And then we plan to infiltrate the Bureau itself, just like what you did before but on a much larger scale, and find their outlines so we have more evidence to take them down. No one deserves to have this done to them.”

Ivan was hardly listening above the roar in his ears. He had been bashful to change clothes in prison, but Alfred had been watching and listening to him do everything for months? He had talked to himself about how much he liked Alfred, and Alfred had shown up to their date—wait, would Alfred have even shown *up* if he hadn’t known first how Ivan felt about him? Was their relationship that screwed that Ivan now had to doubt if his fake boyfriend had been a faking himself?

In his head Ivan was flipping tables, angry and confused in three dimensions. He tried to tell himself that it didn’t matter if Alfred had been his boyfriend or not, because in reality Alfred had been just as much of a criminal as Ivan.

And Alfred, to talk about “doing something bad.” Alfred was the one who deserved to be locked up in prison right now, not Ivan.

But Ivan wasn’t in prison anymore, was he.

Worries about his future faded away, and he looked back up to Eduard and Raivis, who had been waiting for his response. His thoughts condensed down into a singularity, and he knew what he had to do. “I want to help you.”

“We were hoping you’d say that,” Eduard nodded slowly, putting his hands back together. “And we want to help you, too. Consider your debt absolved. You can live here with us, and soon we’ll get you a fresh new laptop. If things go right, your name will be cleared.”

“We will work together to make sure the FBI is exposed for doing this,” chipped in Raivis, looking confident. “And then it’ll be all over for them.”

Ivan felt no joy at hearing his debts were gone and he had a place to stay, however. He felt no safer than he had when the cops had been persuading him to speak in the interview room. He barely processed Raivis eventually leading him out, showing him the bathroom and the spare bedroom and wishing him a good night's rest because he would need it. Ivan was too concentrated on trying to erase Alfred's beautiful, peaceful, happy face from his mind.

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Alfred had kept his head down at work and spoken to no one, just answered when Arthur called. Arthur made no snide comments about what he saw when he searched Ivan's old phone; just kept raising and lowering his eyebrows, jotting things down, posing another question. Alfred kept waiting for the Chief to say "You can leave your badge on my desk," but it never came. Maybe that said something, or maybe Alfred was just paranoid again, as well as crushed inside.

He was allowed to leave to get his phone fixed so the Chief could search it next. Alfred popped by Starbucks first, since it was still that horrible hour of Friday morning where people disposed of bodies in crime shows, and he had probably gotten less than four hours of sleep the night before.

The feeling of wanting to talk to Ivan got worse and worse as Alfred walked along the sidewalk, sipping his 32-ounce, passing maintenance workers and politicians and diplomats and regular people who were all oblivious to what was going on around them and inside Alfred's head. The more he thought about Ivan, the more frustrated he became. He walked into to the phone store with another headache.

There had to be some way to just drop Ivan a note. One he didn't have to see, but one he might see someday in the future. Now that they were over, Alfred knew he shouldn't have to say anything, and didn't even know *what* to say, but completely breaking all connection between them and shipping Ivan to jail or Russia didn't feel like good closure. And he couldn't explain his feelings for Ivan in front of a court.

Not that he had feelings for Ivan anymore. No, he certainly didn't. He couldn't. Just like before—he couldn't.

“So it’s stopped? Just like that?” the phone store employee woman scoffed. “Easily fixed. Are your apps or accounts in order—like, have you tried logging in from a different source yet?”

The meme account . Alfred could message Ivan through the meme account.

He perked up. “Uh, no, yeah, I mean, sorry.” *The meme account!* He downed his Starbucks.

His phone was fixed in less than thirty minutes. On his walk back to headquarters, the first text he received was from Matthew.

Good morning. I don’t really know how to convey this properly, but I just got to the station, and we don’t know where Ivan Braginsky is. Please come quickly, I’ve already alerted the FBI. We think he broke out sometime early this morning. He could be anywhere now.

Chapter End Notes

the sweet escape - gwen

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Haha sorry if this chapter is shitty I’ve been so incredibly busy that every time I tried to write I would get interrupted and my mood would shift a lil, but just so you know I would have had this done last week if it were possible. I’m here until the end.

So, here it comes! What, you ask? Art, of course! If you haven’t seen the wondrous beauty derevosky creates on tumblr @derevoskymusor or via my account @rebels-advocate, you haven’t seen nothin’. Her art from last chapter in the reveal scene is phenomenal, as always, and I have it set as the background on my phone, which in retrospect maybe wasn’t the best idea because now every time I go to do something I get a little shocked and then emotional, but I’m living, you know?

Oh yeah lol and I made a cover

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ivan didn't wake up inside a jail cell on Friday, no matter how much last night (early morning?) had felt like a dream. A terrible, terrible bad dream. But. At least he wasn't inside a jail cell.

That thought made him feel slightly better, as did the wonderful smells coming from the kitchen. He blinked the sleep out of his eyes, reached for his scarf, remembered he didn't have his scarf, groaned, and got up.

He met Lovino in the hall, who still wore only underpants, but now held three emptied breakfast plates and was backing out of the door with all the bolts, a snarl marking up his face. Ivan heard noises from the inside of the room— *definite* human noises—before Lovino slammed and locked the door.

" *Dobroye utro* ," said Ivan.

Lovino jumped and almost dropped his plates. "Shit! Fuck! *Ay!* Who the hell are you? Too early for this!"

" *Dobroye utro,* Ivan!" someone called cheerfully from down the hall.

In the shared vigilantes' apartment kitchen, the three others were haggling over the last of the meal: "Can I get a sausage? Can I *please* get a sausage?" Ivan bid them hello and was delighted to see they had already set a plate for him, but he was more astounded by what sat next to it.

"What is this?" He ran a finger delicately across the smooth surface. He knew what it was.

Felicks, in a sweater, skirt and slippers, plopped down in a seat at the other end of the tiny table and chewed on the sausage he had won. Chin raised, he didn't look Ivan in the eyes. "You're welcome. One of the most expensive orders I ever got."

"We thought it would be best to get you a new one," offered Eduard, in pinstriped pajamas. "You will need it for working with us. Tonight we will find the old one and get rid of it before the police do."

You will not look at it, you will not let anyone see it, and you will forget who gave it to you. If I am not here, you will break it into small pieces and throw them into the river. "I don't know where the old computer is," Ivan admitted, staring down at the shiny new slab of metal. He wondered how the "circle" knew so much about the FBI and the police's movements—surely they hadn't hacked them again? *The FBI guys will sweep by later, but if we find that computer…* "The cops could not find it the first time, and it was in an obvious place."

"Maybe you just forgot it," tried Raivis. He wore another SAVE THE WHALES shirt, a baseball cap, and a duffel bag, looking like he was just about to walk out the door and into another traffic-blocking protest.

"I never forget," Ivan said, his voice going quieter and quieter as he thought. *He's innocent* .

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Time: just before noon. Location: the back parking lot outside the police department. People present: three FBI agents from two separate divisions, two FBI division chiefs, two cops, one History Museum employee, and two distressed familial absolute units.

"We have a lawyer!" hollered Ivan's sister Natalya. "Where *is* he!"

“I don’t understand how he could just be...gone,” muttered Yekaterina to herself in her own language. “It’s like when he moved, all over again.”

“Ma’am, I promise you that we are doing everything we can to find him,” Matthew Williams began.

Natalya stepped up to him. “You are doing *everything* ?” In short, she looked extremely skeptical. “Do not call me your ‘ma’am.’ *Everything* ?”

Carlos Machado flicked his cigar around. He didn’t look too skeptical. “Everything except arresting those most close to him.”

Arthur sent a pointed look at Alfred, who looked away.

“This is injustice,” hissed Natalya. Yekaterina just kept shaking her head, shaking her head. The high midday sun beat down on Alfred’s back, and when Natalya scanned the crowd and stopped on him, squinting out a glare, he felt sweat. He wondered for the first time un-absentmindedly what exactly she knew. She had seen the display in the holding cell room. She had heard the words he and Ivan had shared. But Alfred also knew Ivan hadn’t told his sisters about him, out of shame, maybe? Fear; alienation? Or was it for the same reason he hadn’t told his sisters he was a spy? “You—all of you—are *wrong* .”

“We’re doing what we can do,” put in Arthur. His face was hard, but his tone had softened up considerably since how cold he had seemed the day before. “And I’m sorry I have to tell you this, but your brother might not be the person you believe him to be.”

“No,” said Yekaterina. “Not right.” She took her sister’s hand and stepped back one step.

Natalya said something to her, and then they both began walking swiftly back to their rental car, throwing angry glances over their shoudlers. The rest of the company subsequently let out a collective long sigh.

“Should we go inside, at least?” Matthew suggested, his hands resting tiredly at his belt.

They followed him to an air-conditioned meeting room deep within the police station, and the door was locked as everyone took their seats. Kiku sat next to Alfred and gave him an encouraging look, though Alfred wasn’t exactly sure what he should feel encouraged for until someone started talking.

“To begin,” said Elizabeta Héderváry, “I think that we should catch up with each other. We all know we’re both busy, and it’s obvious lots of things have been happening since we all got an update. Would it be easier if what’s left of the gray division goes first? I think it would be easier if the gray division goes first.”

Nods all around. “A-Are we taking notes?” meekly asked Toris.

“Depends on if there’s a test later,” whispered back Alfred, the first words he had spoken in ten minutes, which was uncanny. “And boy do I think there will be.”

Héderváry didn’t wait for them and jumped in immediately. “I’ve spent a lot of my time covering some of the work started by Bonnefoy, Beilschmidt the Elder, and Fernandez-Carriedo. I go around town undercover looking for leads on their cases, but it seems the trail is running cold. No more witnesses have come forward, and when I searched the homes of the agents I did not find anything, either, except for their junk. Records—public and private—give me nothing about their whereabouts. I even went to the *bowling alley* to ask questions.” She brushed through her long chestnut hair, her veil of strength lifting for just a moment. “The most unnerving part is that when I checked security cameras in the areas and on routes they were last heard from, all of the cameras were turned off, broken, or just fakes anyway. Nothing from the streets or the subways. Their cell phones are missing and untraceable, too. And since the agents have no known strong connections besides us in Washington…”

Ludwig raised his head out of a bow. “Would you like to say something?” she asked him quietly.

He swallowed. “If you are done, yes.”

Aside from the general despair in the room, Alfred found that renewing his interest in the FBI sideplot relaxed him from thinking about Ivan. Toris had been scribbling away on a spare sheet in his logbook; Alfred being separated personally from the conflict made it easier to see the conflict as more of an actual conflict than just some problem he was being paid to occupy his time with solving. He remembered how a few weeks ago he had been vying to be involved. Would his life had turned out better or worse, he couldn't tell.

Ludwig had brought along notes, too. He cleared his throat after getting them out. He looked different than when Alfred had last paid attention to him, somehow. He still gave off the emotionally constipated "closet gay, maybe also a closet furry" vibe, and although his eyes seemed sharper today, there were circles under them. Was he...nervous?

Alfred propped his chin up with his hand. *Aaaand that's enough of trying to read the mood for today. I've reached my max.*

"I have been visiting Feliciano Vargas a lot recently," Ludwig began. After a short pause, he cleared his throat once more. "I've seen his house, his job, and a few other places he likes to spend his time. Here are some of the things I found uncanny." He put on his glasses and read from his list. "Does not own a telephone or any other Internet-accessing device, including his old destroyed cell phone. Won't talk in detail about his family in Italy. Doesn't have enough income from his job to pay for all his bills and transportation and all the junk he keeps in his apartment—I calculated—yet always seems to conjure up enough. Did not finish the college he was registered to attend here. He is apparently left-handed, but I've seen him...do many things...um…" He paused, picked up a pen, and crossed something out on the paper. Clearing his throat for the third time, he finished: "He asked me about Gilbert. And he—one time we were going home from dinner, and he just took off running. I have never seen someone run so fast. I couldn't catch up, but by the time I did, he...we bumped into each other and broke the special recording glasses."

Alfred assumed he meant the special glasses he himself was supposed to get, or had been supposed to. "Those were expensive," mumbled Kirkland wistfully.

"Anything else?" prompted Chief Elizabeta, and Ludwig's ears began to turn color.

"I have heard nothing from my brother. I have to feed his bird now and it's abominable." He stacked his papers promptly and neatly, the sound coming out harsh over the quiet tones everyone had been using. "That is all."

“I’m sorry,” said Elizabeta. For a moment she looked as if she were about to ask something else, but then thought better of it and let her face settle. She slowly glanced at Alfred. The chummy inclinations that had existed between them had faded into a sort of uncertainty, as it had now with everyone Alfred knew. He sniffed and examined the grain in the table. “Would you like to go?”

“We’ve been through most of it already,” sighed Arthur, “I examined Braginsky’s phone, and everything matches up so far with the story he’s given.”

“What story?” Ludwig questioned.

“Well.” Arthur straightened his tie, his eyes on the ceiling. “You see, for a few weeks, unbeknownst to me—”

Alfred looked up. He could talk for himself, dammit, he could talk. “Ivan and I were dating,” he blurted out.

Héderváry’s eyes went wide, and she let out a little snort of polite laughter, covering it with her hand. “Oh. Oh, excuse me, please. *Oh.* ”

Alfred found himself to be not offended. He just tried to keep his breathing steady.

Ludwig leaned forward. “Really? But— *how* ?”

He would. “We just kept meeting,” he explained, shrugging. “It was an accident at first, but then it just...I don’t know... *happened* . I mean, nothing happened! We just...I don’t know. We went on one official date. And then he turned out to be a hacker. Sad. Alexa went and played ‘Despacito.’ I’m fine now if anyone was wondering.” *Liar.*

Ludwig was shaking his head. “I don’t understand. How could you stay with him if you knew the repercussions?”

Alfred blew out a puff of air. He opened his mouth to respond, but just like when he had tried to tell Kirkland about Ivan that one time long ago, nothing came out. He realized that it wasn’t something he could answer. Matthew met his eyes.

“Sometimes we don’t know why we do things,” Matthew said softly.

“That’s for certain,” remarked Arthur Kirkland.

Ludwig slowly sat back in his seat.

“But you understand now that it’s against the rules, correct?” Elizabeta Héderváry inspected the faces of all three agents sitting in the room, concerned. “I am all for love, but there is so much at stake.”

Toris, Alfred, and Ludwig nodded in unison.

“Maybe after all this is over,” she resumed, “we can put protections in place so no one gets hurt again. Your procedure *is* quite...intense.”

Arthur exhaled. “If this all is over and there’s anything left to reform.”

Kiku raised his head and spoke for the first time. “What do you mean?”

He ran a hand through his messy hair. “Nothing. Just a slip of the tongue. Perhaps we should get to managing the situation. Braginsky’s escaped.”

Carlos shook out his dreads. “I was on that night shift! Telling ya, I saw nothin’! It was quiet. Most boring I’ve ever done. The only thing that happened was a couple of those whale people came and tried to pitch their sale to me. Wasn’t havin’ it.”

“I checked the security footage right when I came in and it was running loops of blank hallways and full cells,” added Matt. “But the time points us to somewhere between two and three in the morning when he escaped. We found that the alarm in the nearest emergency exit door to the cell had been disabled, and there are tire marks on the pavement. If he escaped by vehicle, he could truly be anywhere by now.”

“Wait, hold up, amigo.” Alfred raised a hand. “Whale people. At two in the morning?”

“We get all kinds of crap at two in the morning. It’s not surprising, kid.” Carlos stuck in his cigar.

Alfred faked a cough.

“Were the outdoor cameras disabled as well?” asked Arthur.

When Matthew nodded, Elizabeta put down her pen. “This sounds exactly like the kidnappings. Is it possible Braginsky was taken unwillingly?”

“There were other guards on duty,” Carlos answered. “They said they heard no scuffle. And whoever messed with the cameras...had to have done it soon before.”

The table’s occupants glanced around dumbfoundedly. Everyone was thinking the same thing: to escape from a high-security prison in Washington DC, the nation’s capital, was no small feat. It was near impossible Ivan had done it himself, however great of a spy he was.

After a silence, Arthur turned to Alfred. “Did he have any connections around here? You said he didn’t have many friends.”

Alfred nodded carefully. “He never mentioned he was close to anyone but me and his sisters. Maybe...Yao Wang? You know, the *Wok & Roll* guy? He ate there a lot. Or maybe someone from work?”

“It might have been smart to keep his sisters here,” Elizabeta mumbled.

“It did seem suspicious that Braginsky was suddenly caught only when others close to him entered the picture,” Arthur mused, scratching his chin.

“Which may have been my fault again,” answered Alfred in a quiet tone for his normal voice. Somehow he couldn’t picture the sisters being in on it. Natalya had slapped the tic tac out of him, sure. Would she have if she was a hacker, trying to play it cool but not too cool? Hard to say. Also, their emotional displays just seemed too genuine, combined with the fact that they hadn’t known about Alfred. Either that or they were tremendous actresses, but Alfred had spied on them himself, and when Ivan had ripped his phone away from Yekaterina on that beach… When Ivan had said “I was prepared to take you to meet my sisters…” They were just a normal family; dysfunctional, distant, caring. Not that Alfred was prepared to believe anything they said from here on out. Ivan had sucked all of them, Alfred included, into his black hole.

Matthew straightened his tie. “I think...we should stick with what we know, first. And we know for certain that Ivan’s out and about. If we can catch him again, he’ll lead us right to the others, if there are others.”

“Smart move,” said Kirkland. “So, the only problem is...where is the bloke?”

Silence fell again. And again, everyone’s eyes drifted to Alfred.

He cleared his throat, pawing at the table. “I have no clue. Like, really.”

“If he is in a vehicle and has not stopped driving since two in the morning, he could be in another state at this point,” thought Ludwig.

Toris looked up from his notes. “He could not have gone back to his apartment because we are searching it tomorrow, right?”

“No, he’s too smart for that.” Alfred kicked at the wheels on his chair. (The back of his mind took delight to realize his chair had wheels.) “I think he would stay here. But...it doesn’t really matter, does it, if he was taken by someone else? Like, think about it. There’s no way he could have broken out himself.”

“Just like Feliciano,” Ludwig murmured to himself. “One step ahead.”

“So the only potential connections we have right now are his sisters, who can barely speak English, Yao Wang, a street food vendor, and SAVE THE WHALES, a wildlife preservation organization.” Arthur Kirkland snapped his folders shut. “Now, I don’t mean to sound silly, but I think the only thing we can do now is split up and look for clues.”

And it was at that moment Alfred’s neck snapped forward as he remembered what he had meant to mention. He prepared to speak, but didn’t. On purpose this time. It would sound even sillier to mention the meme account, and Alfred wanted to keep as much of his and Ivan’s relationship out of public eye (private eye, really) as possible. So as everyone began to clear, he trailed his boss. He had learned his lesson in not telling people things.

“Oh, yes,” said Arthur in the parking lot. “I still need to go through your phone.”

Alfred grunted through the nausea that sentence gave him. He countered with, “I think I know a way to reach Ivan.”

Arthur let out a tired puff of air and studied him for a second. “Okay, you know what? Sit down, boy. Let’s...talk.”

Alfred didn’t really want to “talk” again, but he followed the Chief to his car and fell into the passenger seat anyway. Losing Ivan had really taken the gusto out of him.

“Did you know,” he blurted out, “that Washington, DC is one of the gayest places in America? Like, the nation’s capital?”

Kirkland put a hand to his forehead. “And why did you feel it necessary to begin the conversation that way?” A pause. “Is that some kind of...excuse?”

“No. I don’t know. It just...came to me.”

Arthur put his hands together. “How nice. And, as much as I’d enjoy continuing this interesting conversation about the wonders of your love life, I still have to ask.” He finally met Alfred’s eyes. “What were you thinking?”

Sometimes we don’t know why we do things . “I wasn’t thinking.” That’s what it was—a mistake. The whole thing had been a mistake, and he was over it.

“Do you want to know what *I* was thinking?” Arthur questioned.

Alfred frowned. “Wait, what? So you *did* know? The whole time? Oh my God. Oh my. I had a feeling, but I wasn’t sure—”

“I knew from the beginning that there were things you weren’t telling me,” he explained. “But not for this reason.” Then he laughed a little. It was strange to hear him laugh, but somehow not a bad sort of strange. “By George, not for *this* reason. I couldn’t say anything to the rest of the group or to *anyone* because of this, but I thought you were a mole, Alfred Jones. For the longest time I was completely convinced there was a spy in our division. I thought you were telling Braginsky things, feeding him info. And you were, just not the info I was looking for. That’s why I told Mr. Williams and Mr. Honda not to say anything to you when we caught him. I was ready to arrest you at the station that day until I saw your reaction. I mean, Chief Elizabeta did say our routine was intense; it’s unbelievable.”

Alfred tried to breathe slowly. “Wow,” he uttered. “But no, I’m not a spy, I’m just really dumb.”

Arthur’s faint smile slipped away. “Truly, I don’t think you’re really dumb, either. I became a little crazy and obsessive myself. It is correct that we all need better communication.”

This was the first time in a long time Alfred felt reassured when talking to his boss. “Gee, thanks.”

“So, speaking of communication, what did you have to tell me? You know a way to contact Ivan?”

Alfred nodded, smoothing his hands down his pants. Here goes nothing. “So you know that he’s into memes and stuff?”

An eyebrow arched. “Er...”

“I was thinking maybe I could message him. Through his meme account. If there’s some way he’s gotten ahold of some new device and can access it, all we need is for him to respond and maybe we can trace it to find out where he is.”

Both eyebrows were arched now, and Kirkland’s arms were crossed. “I’m usually one to agree with the philosophy that the Internet ruins everything, but I think that’s actually a good plan. This isn’t because you want to talk to him about any lasting feelings you might have, though, is it?”

At first it had been, but now Alfred had to be sure it wasn’t. “I don’t feel anything for him anymore.” There was a time Alfred had been so devoted to Ivan that he was willing to risk his job, but he had decided that time was over. No matter how much he still thought about Ivan. No matter how he wondered if, right now, wherever he was, Ivan was thinking about him, too.

.

Ivan wasn't thinking about him. Ivan really wasn't. He wasn't thinking about how the inside of his now-vacant apartment might have looked to Alfred through the camera of his phone, or what Alfred might have thought about Ivan's meager belongings. He wasn't thinking about how they might have sat on the couch together here or made dinner together here or watched Vines together here. He wasn't thinking about Alfred at all.

He saw the sunflower on the sill and gasped. "It is dying!"

Raivis, his lock-picking kit in tow, glanced over. "Best not to water it, or they will know someone was here."

But Ivan didn't care. He wouldn't be staying anyway. He filled a tall glass with his gloved hands and emptied the entire thing into the pot, hoping it was enough to keep the flower alive for however long he would be gone.

"Um, where did you say the computer was?" Raivis asked, a few rooms away. Ivan followed the teenager to the bathroom and they checked under the sink together.

Nothing. Gone.

"She moved it," he whispered to himself. Somehow, Natalya had known. She had seen Ivan using it that day when she had accidentally come into the bathroom. Maybe she hadn't known what its purpose really was, but she had known that it was an object of great importance to him, and had hidden it from the police in the spare seconds she had had upon being woken up in the middle of the night. "But where?"

He searched the rest of his bedroom, Raivis keeping watch outside. Wedged under all the scarves in his knitting/scarf drawer, wrapped in the scarf he had taken off before he had been taken, he found it, along with a note in Katya's handwriting. " *We love you.* "

Chapter End Notes

telephone - beyonce & gaga

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I just wanna say another big group thank you to all the people who keep leaving big wonderful comments, ESPECIALLY to those who do it frequently and/or for multiple chapters. I know I respond kinda late but I love each and every one of you so much and I read them all multiple times over and you have no idea how great they make me feel. Never be afraid to say something!

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day, even though it wasn't a workday, Alfred found himself stepping out of the Ford on a sunny midtown street where the *Wok & Roll* truck sat. Matt and Kiku backed him up as he approached.

"What's cookin', good—uh—good day to you." Alfred cleared his throat. Yao was frowning.

"What do you want, bitch?" He looked like he was in the middle of cleaning out the fryers, because everything smelled like the apocalypse was upon them.

Matt and Kiku respectfully let Alfred do the talking. "Um. Hi. Not food this time. I'm actually lookin' for a guy. Do you know an Ivan Braginsky?"

Yao threw down his rag and squinted. "Sounds Russian. Is he about this tall, blond, big nose, wears yellow gloves and scarf, got like purple eyes, really overbearing?"

Alfred blinked. He hadn't been expecting it would be this easy. "Uh, yeah, that's...that's him."

Yao nodded once, turned, and went back to working. "I do not know him."

"Oh, come on!" Alfred whined as Matthew stepped forward and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Please don't withhold information from us, sir," Matt began. "This is extremely important. I'm with the police at—"

“I said I do not *know* him,” stressed Wang. “Maybe I have *seen* him before. Maybe he got lunch here a few times.” He clanked some metal bins together loudly, whipping his long, dark ponytail through the air.

Alfred crossed his arms, but a shot of hope spiraled through his veins. “When did you last see him.”

“Dunno.”

“What was he doing? What did he say when he talked to you?”

“Dunno.”

“Did he ever talk about...me?”

Yao’s frown intensified. “You sound like jealous lover. Go away, stupid American.”

While Alfred pouted, Kiku tried. He approached the counter, folded his hands, and said only, “Please.”

Yao Wang sniffed, then put his hand on the window. “I do not want to be part of this, okay? Understand? I run business. *Business.* So if you don’t want my food, I leave me *alone* .”

Alfred patted his pockets. “Wait, fine, fine, hit me up with some of those rangoons.”

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Across town—no less than three streets away from Alfred, to be precise, but none of them knew it—the target of the FBI, one of the most-wanted criminals of the era, Ivan "Vanya" Braginsky, sat in the back of a SAVE THE WHALES van. He was squished in amongst various paraphernalia: slogan T-shirts, protester signs, boxes, buttons, Raivis, and Eduard. They were on a mission to destroy the FBI. Out of context it sounded hilarious.

While Raivis made light chatter with the driver—who had no idea what was really going on, obviously—Ivan toyed around with his new laptop. Eduard had a matching one, and using it, had already gotten their clearance to get inside the building. In a lit display of irony, Ivan was going to pretend to be a custodian again. He was dressed in some old work clothes and caked in makeup Felicks had claimed looked "natural," but Ivan had seen his collection of Kylie CosmeticsSM. Nevertheless, Ivan's skin was no longer standout pale, his eyes wore brown contacts, and his hair was dyed brown and swept up into a baseball cap. He looked indistinguishable, and not just virtually.

The things he could do with a less-than-inch-thick sheet of metal. It was so much better than his old computer, which was currently sitting safely under his mattress in the group apartment, with indirect thanks to his sisters. He had moved all his intel over to the new computer and planned to destroy the old one soon so it would never end up in the hands of an agent. Ivan was filled to the brim with childish giddiness. This was the only day they had to do this; both the black and gray divisions of the FBI would be gone today, searching his apartment (finding nothing) and looking for him (also finding nothing). Alfred had no idea Ivan was right under his nose the whole time. The feeling was...unexpectedly thrilling.

"How did you get the FBI information, anyway?" Ivan adjusted his uncomfortable seating, accidentally knocking a small cascade of supplies into Raivis's lap. He jumped. "Ah, I apologize."

"Wow, look at all those...stickers," Raivis blurted out.

Eduard picked one up. "I think they are actually magnets." He tried to stick one on the back of the computer and it fell off. "Oof."

“Oof,” Ivan repeated to himself quietly. They hadn’t answered his question. He frowned and was about to voice it again when the driver interrupted him.

“Y’all asked for the J. Edgar Hoover Building? Well, we’re here!” she cheered, parking right on the street in a once-in-a-blue-moon free spot.

Ivan stretched over his companions to gaze out at FBI Headquarters. The concrete complex wasn’t tall, but the endless rows of black, black windows gave him vertigo. Was one of them Alfred’s? It was strange to consider the sheer amount of information the US government had been processing and continued to process, and to think that it happened right there, in a squat building on Pennsylvania Avenue; worlds of secrets just behind walls. And today he was about to infiltrate, to discover those secrets. The giddy feeling swept over him again.

“Are we ready?” Eduard asked in Russian. “Know the plan?” Ivan and Raivis nodded. They had been working on it all morning.

“I’m gonna steal it,” Ivan said to himself over a small smile, adrenaline building up inside of him. “I’m gonna steal the Declaration of Independence.”

Raivis glanced rapidly between them. “Uh. Was that...um. On...the plan?”

Eduard laughed nervously. “M-Maybe we should go over it one more time.”

The plan was this: Ivan and Raivis, in their disguises, would step out of the truck. All the cameras watching them would blip for this, and for the fifteen seconds it took for them to reach the front doors. (Ivan only looked up once he was inside.) A security guard would scan their faked IDs. (Raivis was asked, perhaps in jest, whether he was a little young to be cleaning the trash bins of some of the most informed people in the world, and he responded with a “Yes, yes I am.”) Ivan would then make to itch his ear, which turned on the headset that connected him to Eduard, who remained in the back of the van. After suggesting the driver take a coffee break, Eduard would boot up his systems and map their route to the spy division headquarters.

“You’re going to get into the elevator and turn the key for the negative two-hundredth floor,” he said.

Ivan was confused. “Negative two-hundred? All I am seeing is ground and lobby levels…”

Raivis ducked around him, standing so his back blocked the elevator camera, and inserted something metal into the key slot that wasn’t a key. Then he pressed a button. “Oh,” remarked Ivan as, after a second, the numbers changed and they began to fall.

“It’s secret,” Eduard explained into their headsets. “The agents take different elevators, I think, but they have their own security to get through. You’re just maintenance.”

Raivis was taking deep breaths. “My ears are popping,” he whispered, then coughed.

Ivan had been caught once in an elevator, and didn’t want to be caught again, but right now he just felt hot. Swampy.

When the doors opened, Eduard instructed them to leave immediately if they saw anyone, but the negative two-hundredth floor was empty as predicted. Ivan inhaled. He didn’t want to say it looked exactly as he imagined it to look, but it was close. Dim lighting, clusters of cubicles, dark chairs. The occasional beep from some machine deep within. This was where it all happened.

Eduard’s voice came to them. “One second... *now* . The cameras will run loops, but you should still be fast and look inconspicuous. Anything and everything you can find. Record it.”

Ivan knew what he wanted to find first. Heart pounding, he ignored Raivis and walked along the cubicles. Which one was Alfred’s?

There was one with two recycling bins and a desk that was spotless save for three separate photos of three separate dogs. Not Alfred’s. Too neat. Another one, equally neat, decorated

with nothing but another SAVE THE WHALES magnet taped to the wall carpeting. Suspicious, but not Alfred's. And another one, with—

It had to be Alfred's. Ivan stopped and gawked. The superhero posters, the faint food dust on the chair, the labels on the file cabinets marked out in the same handwriting as the fortune cookie phone number...the NASA star chart. Ivan's lips curled at that. He was well aware of Alfred's space passions. Unmistakeable.

He could almost picture his ex-boyfriend here, spinning around, laughing to his work friends over the walls, annoying his British boss and fabricating fun stories to translate and tell Ivan. Ivan felt suddenly lonely. He knew Alfred had used this place to *watch* him. Did he laugh at Ivan's antics and pull in his secret agent pals to make fun of him? Did he fall asleep due to the not-so-exciting excitements of Ivan's friendless life? Did he—did he once text Ivan from this seat and watch his reactions, studying them to practice how to act in front of him later? Had he once maybe smiled to himself because of Ivan?

Ivan felt a wave of shivers trace through his limbs. He didn't want to know any of the answers. Alfred had breached both his life and his trust, and no matter how wonderful their little time together had been, Alfred had spent it *knowing* that all Ivan's information was just a screen away.

There was a monitor on the desk. Ivan hooked up his new computer to it, sat right down in Alfred's chair, and hacked into it.

There wasn't hacking software on the monitor itself, so Ivan guessed Alfred had used a laptop or some other device to watch him. A laptop was portable, and probably easier that way. What Ivan did find, however, with almost zero effort, were the FBI black and gray division statements and codes of conduct.

Sickened, he skimmed through them. They outlined the purpose of each division and highlighted the details of phone-hacking, as well as other types of hacking the FBI used to *watch* people. Ivan was disgusted, but he copied and transferred the data to his computer for future use as evidence. All those privacy laws...completely bypassed. Eduard breathed out a "Wow," into his ear. Then, Ivan searched up personnel files. He found many names, including the one of Agent Alfred F. Jones. Copying those as well, he tried not to stare too long at Alfred's bright and charming ID picture.

There were three personnel files that piqued Ivan's attention, however, and none of them were Alfred's. An "Antonio Fernandez-Carriedo," a "Gilbert Beilschmidt," and a "Francis Bonnefoy" were all declared "MIA," and all three were field agents in the gray division. Ivan chewed his lip. Searched some more. "Gilbert" had a younger brother who was also in the FBI, and this "Ludwig" was marked as working "presently" for the gray division, but that statistic had only been updated recently—a few days after Gilbert's MIA status had been updated. When Ivan checked, he found that the gray division only had two members, while the black division had three. So they were short-staffed. Scrambling.

A thought occurred to Ivan, dropping into his mind like a stone. He went back to the personnel catalogue and traced it for disturbances. It took awhile, but sure enough, he found a mistake. His own mistake, in fact. All three of the MIA files had been copied and transferred previously—by Ivan himself, on a Thursday afternoon, on the National Museum of Natural History's server. The data he had stolen; the data that had ended him up in jail.

"Who are these three people?" he breathed to Eduard.

There was a little wince from the other side of the line. "...Lovino can explain b-better than I can."

"You're holding them in that room, right?" Ivan questioned, and immediately knew he was correct. "Kidnapped."

"A-A bargaining chip for when we need to use it," Eduard answered.

Ivan thought. His wig had been snatched. The circle had abducted three FBI agents and had been holding them for weeks. That was kind of scary, combined with the fact that if the circle really wanted true justice for a privacy breach, they wouldn't have done something so risky to further condemn themselves, and they were already doing pretty risky things. Perhaps they suspected that they wouldn't win in court against the US government, and were preparing to use other means to ensure they gained their freedom, such as trading hostages. "Does the FBI know?" he asked.

“Hard to say,” answered Eduard. “We don’t think they’ve realized we’re connected yet. But again, crimes that are...physical...are not my area of expertise.”

And besides, those three agents were criminals, too. Who knew how many people they had hunted, spied on? Maybe even Ivan himself. Maybe Ivan’s sisters as well. He was overtaken by another bout of the shivers.

He disconnected the computers and wiped all traces of himself from the monitor, then closed it back down. As he searched through the files Alfred had on him in the cabinets, he felt unbearable anger. He wished people could just love one another and get along and not feel the need to poke their noses in places they didn’t belong. He wished the world would just be friendlier.

He pulled out a thick folder of jumbled notes and flipped through them, sighing to himself. At the top of each page were the words IVAN BRAGINSKY written in Alfred’s drawl, and a date and time. It was a log. Ivan’s already sick stomach began to clench up even further. Alfred had been keeping an actual log of what Ivan did. As he flicked through, he read some of the entries. “Woke up, looked at memes, posted memes, went to work, came home, made dinner, watched Vines, did laundry, looked at memes, went to bed.” It could have been any day in the life. He looked through more and more log pages, and a lot of them were verbatim identical. Ivan really was that boring. He wanted to cry.

When he flicked through more recent logs, however, it became clearer to him. On the day they had first met in the park, a Tuesday? Nothing was marked except for the usual. That Thursday Ivan had been “late?” The usual. Ivan started to grow confused. The logs said zilch about “FaceTimed Alfred for three hours in the middle of the night” or “went on date with Alfred in the park” or “texted Alfred,” all of which were highly questionable actions to report. The more recent Ivan got in the log, the more censored Ivan’s “life” became. Sometimes Alfred would throw in an exotic detail here or there like “took out the trash” or “went grocery shopping” or “played board games with sisters,” but other than that, Alfred’s made-up life for Ivan had become a lie.

Ivan sat back down and fingered his scarf, staring at the misprints. “ *Why you always lying?* ” he hummed to himself in a quiet, distorted, far-off tone. It didn’t make any sense.

Raivis’s voice brought him out of the reverie. “I found something!” the teen alerted from a little ways across the room.

Ivan arranged the log back into the condition it had been in and shoved it back into the cabinet. He brought himself and his computer over to a desk in a cubicle that was set slightly apart from the others. Embroidery patterns and stacks of old Christie novels decorated this one.

Raivis and his lock-picking kit sat on the floor; all the desk drawers were unlocked and open. In his right glove was a slip of stationary with some words written on it, and in his left was a cell phone. “I think this is the desk that belongs to the Chief of the black division,” he explained. “And look at what I just found.”

Ivan marveled. The cell phone was *his* . The one they had confiscated from him and had probably searched through by now. He reached out to touch it, and then pulled back, stopping himself.

Raivis gulped. “What’s even more interesting is this.” He offered Ivan the slip of paper. Ivan squinted. It was information about a cell phone, but one that wasn’t his.

It listed Alfred’s phone number and password, along with a few notes of things the Chief had found inside. So the Chief had searched Alfred’s phone, as well, but Alfred had gotten it back. It wasn’t here. Alfred probably had it right now.

Another thought occurred to Ivan.

A not-so-good thought, but a curious thought indeed.

And after reading Alfred’s fib-filled log, he *was* curious.

“Put my phone back. I won’t need it,” he ordered Raivis, who obliged with a nod. “But record what’s on that piece of paper.”

Eduard chimed in through the headset. “What’s going on?”

“How are we on time?” interrogated Ivan.

“Er—you’ve got at least an hour, but I wouldn’t stress. The driver hasn’t even returned from lunch yet. The FBI are still occupied with other things right now. I think they’re interviewing the heads of SAVE THE WHALES right now.” A tiny laugh. “Like that’ll get them anywhere.”

“We’ve found all we need,” he declared. He was itchy anyway, and perspiration had been coagulating under his armpits and across his back. “It’s time to go.”

Raivis, when he was done copying down Alfred’s phone information, raised his curly head. “What?”

Ivan just stared at him, forcing him to listen with his eyes. Or pleading, rather. Raivis eventually popped up.

“Let’s make sure everything is how we found it,” Ivan suggested, making one last sweep of the premises. He passed a refrigerator full of tomatoes and a conspiracy corkboard that held pretty pictures of Feliciano Vargas connected by strings. Although it was tempting to examine the rest, Ivan didn’t feel a wanting to anymore. He truly felt they needed no more. The enigma of the FBI and the hackers was beginning to untangle. It wasn’t all the way there yet, but it was close.

He and Raivis stood in the elevator, listening to smooth jazz. The ride up was long. “Do you miss being a gardener?” Raivis squeezed out.

“Yes,” Ivan admitted. It felt like years since he had been pruning bushes. The nostalgia weighed on his shoulders and made him tired. “What did all of you do before you were felons?”

“Felicks and the Italians joined later on, but, well, when we were younger, some of us wrote fanfiction online,” he replied shyly. “We became friends on the Internet.”

“And then?” Ivan prompted.

A drawn-out pause. “A-And then we discovered what else the Internet could do for us.”

Typical. The elevator took them back up, up, and up into the life of the city above.

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The sunflower had been watered. Recently. Alfred, feeling like a detective, pressed into the wet dirt with his glove-covered fingers. Wetness.

“What are you doing?” asked Arthur Kirkland from Ivan’s living room, also wearing gloves and holding an empty trash bag.

“Still looking for clues,” Alfred mumbled back. Maybe one of the cops had watered it when Ivan was gone, wanting to be nice. Matthew’s group *was* pretty nice. Alfred, not really thinking, decided to continue the streak for the heck of it. He filled one of the glasses by the sink and tipped it into the soil. The flower would probably be dead soon anyway. Probably.

Kirkland walked in. He looked frustrated and defeated, his tie undone, his messy hair even messier than usual. “Well, this is brilliant. What a complete waste of a day. Wang Yao is noncompliant and SAVE THE WHALES are a bunch of clueless buffoons. Three hours and I’ve found absolutely nothing, and the apartment is completely torn apart. You?”

“Same.” Alfred felt weird standing in Ivan’s hollow kitchen, especially when everything was covered in sheets and CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS tape. He hadn’t been able to stand the bedroom worse. “I don’t know where else he would hide it. I’ll bet he moved it somehow before.”

Arthur sat down on one of the wooden chairs and just groaned.

Alfred turned around and leaned against the cabinets. This was where Ivan used to set his phone where he cooked, and this was a version of the view Alfred had gotten. Only Ivan wasn’t anywhere in sight. “Is it time to message him yet?”

Arthur lifted his head out of his hands, pulling them down his face. He groaned again. “...Yes. Then if he turns the tables and tracks *us* , then your phone will only lead him back here.”

Alfred pulled out his cell phone and opened up the meme account. It hadn’t been updated since before the arrest, the last meme a classic “tag yourself.” “I’m the one that looks dead,” Alfred mumbled. Then he had a sudden bout of insecurity. “Um. What should I...what should I say?” Talking to Ivan had always been so easy before. He...kind of wished to go back.

Kirkland crossed his legs and put his arms behind his head, closing his eyes. In a calmer, nonchalant voice, he responded, “Anything that warrants a response.”

Alfred shifted his weight, contemplated for a second, and then began to type.

Chapter End Notes

red flag - gwen

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Y’all gotta know the drill by now. This time though derevosky (@derevoskymusor on tumblr) made an entire panel comic thing for chapter 15. Hear that? An entire panel

comic thing? Yeah. That’s right. Hit me up @rebels-advocate before school starts and this story ends and I fade into the mist...

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alfred: ;)(;

Ivan stared at the characters on the screen, still not believing his eyes. The message had come from an empty account, but he knew beyond a doubt it had to be Alfred. None of his meme followers really messaged him directly, and he had even less of a following now that he was too “preoccupied” to post. In fact, his follower count had gone down to 999K instead of one million, which irked him, but there was nothing he could do about it at the moment. Only someone who really knew him would have had the guts to contact him, and in such a cryptic, familiar manner. It was Alfred.

And now the question: did he respond?

“Ugh! If I were you I would tell him to take his crappy sappy messages and fu—”

“Oh my God, but like, why even respond though? He got balls coming to you now. Did you even *like* him?”

Ivan looked between Lovino and Felicks on the couch. They were haggling over a bowl of buttered popcorn in their robes, boredly watching a Sunday morning soap opera. Eduard and Raivis were still asleep, exhausted after yesterday’s escapade, but Ivan was used to waking up early. That and his sleep schedule had been thoroughly bamboozled as of late. “I did,” he said quietly, narrowing his eyes. He felt another stab to the heart. “You wouldn’t understand what it is like.”

Felicks, in the middle of pulling his hair into a bun, looked miffed. “Hah. Try me.”

Ivan redirected his gaze to the message: *;)(;* What had Alfred been attempting to convey? Usually Ivan was good with Internet lingo, but this...this could mean many things, and his

heart felt even stranger trying to sort out the possibilities. Offhandedly, he murmured to Felicks, “Square up.”

There was a little gasp from the couch, and then Lovino groaned out “Go to church!” and tossed some popcorn while a peppy theme song began to echo from the TV.

Was Alfred trying to say something about his...feelings? If so, it was unfair and inopportune and...and Ivan didn’t even want to consider it an option. Obviously Alfred had ulterior motives. Ivan could already guess what would happen if he responded and used his current IP.

And yet. In the depths of FBI headquarters, he had read the log.

You lied to me , Ivan wanted to type, and leave it at that, even though they both knew it and he had already said it. But another fact was that Alfred hadn’t just lied *to* Ivan; he had lied *about* Ivan. *For* Ivan.

And that made his heart doubt itself even more.

But Felicks and Lovino were liars, too, and so were Eduard and Raivis and Feliciano and the three “missing” FBI agents living in a locked room just down the hall. Ivan knew now about many things. He had to sort this one out on his own. He carried the laptop back to his room and shut the door, thinking of how he would approach a response. He had to remember: he didn’t like Alfred anymore. The message meant nothing because he didn’t like Alfred anymore.

But alas—another liar was Ivan himself.

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Ivan: why are you doing this to me.

"He responded!" Alfred practically leapt out of his seat. He struggled to put his glasses back on, accidentally flipping them onto the floor. "He actually responded!"

"What'd he say?" Arthur Kirkland stood up over the wall of cubicles, glancing around.

After a second, Alfred popped back up and met his eyes. "He said, and I quote, in all lower case, using a period, which means you're real serious in the language of our day, 'why are you doing this to me.'"

Arthur just stared. "And…? Did you get the IP?"

"Not yet; I was just really excited." Alfred's heart was still racing. He had expected Ivan to ignore the message— *if* he even read it at all. But the response proved two things: firstly that Ivan had found a new device to access the account from, which meant if was dedicating time to looking through memes he had probably at least found a safe place to do so with WiFi, and secondly that Ivan was still at least a little invested in their whole relationship thing, judging from the content of the message itself. Alfred didn't know if that was good or bad, or how to feel about it yet.

Excitement, though. That was a start. A nice change from depression.

Alfred snapped out of it, connected his phone to his computer, and traced the IP.

"Wait—what? North Dakota?"

Kirkland walked into the cubicle with his clipboard and leaned in to see. "Wow. Isn't North Dakota a little...far?"

Alfred was perplexed. “Yeah, it would have taken him like two days, and North Dakota, like, doesn’t even exist anyway.”

Arthur was also perplexed. “Two days is somewhat doable. Wait—what do you mean North Dakota doesn’t exist?”

Alfred stared hard at him. “Have you ever been to North Dakota? Do you know someone who’s been to North Dakota? Do you know someone who knows someone who’s been to North Dakota?”

Arthur stared hard back. “ *No* , only because I’m from bloody England!”

“Exactly. It’s a sketch state. He’s using a virtual private network to disguise his real location, obviously.” Alfred leaned back in his seat, thinking. “He’s good at this. He would never have fallen for the trick again if it’s what got him last time. He’s smart, you know? But two can play at that game.” He went back to the messaging page on his phone and prepared his thumbs to type, grinning a little. This could be fun. “I’m gonna use a VPN that says I’m at the Denver International Airport.

The Chief shook his head. “I think I’ll leave you to that, then. Tell me what you find.”

A spark flashed in Alfred’s brain. It was funny how *now* it was okay for him to interact directly with Ivan, and the Chief could know about it and everything. “Affirmative.” He wondered if Arthur could detect just how juiced up he really was. This was the first time he had talked with Ivan since the incident at the cell block; for days.

Did he miss it?

Alfred: i was thinking we should talk.

Ivan: ...

Ivan: i agree, but i know exactly what you are trying to do, and it will not work.

Ivan: just so you know. (^◡^✿)

Alfred laughed at the emoji use and then slowly covered his mouth when he realized.

Shit. He did miss it.

He waited a few seconds, and then typed again. It would be so easy to slip back into the free-speech mindset he normally used when chatting, but he had to be careful. He had to craft and censor his messages to try and get a detailed response, yet not reveal any essentials about himself in the process.

Alfred: so...cómo estás

Smooth. Direct. Off to a good start. Ivan took a few moments to respond.

Ivan: i am fine. and you? are you having a nice time at the headquarters of the New World Order?

Shit. Ivan was better at this. He knew where he "was." Time for a diversionary tactic.

Alfred: in fact i am. how good of a hacker are you anyway?

Ivan: as good as i have to be.

Alfred: what does that mean?

Ivan: how good of a hacker are YOU?

Alfred bit his lip. This was getting intense. He opened the bag of Cheddar Jalapeño Cheetos® he had brought along and began to stress-eat.

Alfred: as good as I have to be.

Ivan: That is just what I said! Not answering the question!

Alfred: Well you didn't answer MY question

Ivan: Yes I did. You go first. You are the one getting paid for it.

Alfred: Okay so if you're NOT getting paid for it then why are you doing it?

Ivan: If you are really that good I guess you will be finding out soon.

Alfred: I know enough to know you're not really in North Dakota. You're still right here in DC.

There was another short pause before Ivan typed back again. Alfred breathed through his mouth.

Ivan: There is no way you could have known that.

Ivan was right. Alfred hadn't known. He had guessed.

“Bingo!” he shouted.

“Everything all right over there?” The Chief’s voice drifted from afar through the still humidity.

Alfred: ;)

It thrilled Alfred to have won a marginal piece of something over Ivan now. To have proved himself capable of being truly sneaky and tricky. But the fight wasn’t over. He wanted more.

Ivan: Not possible.

Arthur came over and read through the conversation so far. He began to nod slowly, impressed? “What should I do next?” Alfred asked, an eager beaver.

“This is progress,” Kirkland replied, studying how the tones of the texts had changed from casual lowercase to formal grammar. “If you can keep him interested in talking, perhaps we can arrange a rendezvous.”

“A meeting? To capture him again?” Inquired over a handful of Cheetos®.

“Perhaps, but we will have to come prepared. Pretend to want to hear him out.”

“Oh, I’m not pretending.” And he really wasn’t. Finally, Alfred had a chance to get the motive and the backstory—to piece together the smiling, scarred puzzle that was Ivan.

Alfred: well, you’ve gotta know i’m not really in Colorado

Ivan: Of course. You're still here in DC too.

Alfred: Yeah.

Alfred: I was thinking we should meet up.

Ivan: Some of your ideas were good and funny like the nachos or the video game you told me about, but I do not like this one.

Alfred: Why?

Ivan: Do you really think I want to see you?

Now they were encroaching upon troubled waters. Alfred had to keep sailing, though. He wanted to. Needed to.

Alfred: Why else would you still be talking to me?

Alfred: ...

Alfred: I kinda do wanna see you

Ivan: I know you want to see me to put me in jail again! Do not pretend!!!

Ivan: And don't say something about feelings either because I don't want to hear any of it. Cruel.

Okay so *that* hurt a little. Alfred had thought he was done with crying in couch forts at midnight and onto the shoulders of Matt or Kiku. He hadn't considered—well, he had, but he couldn't judge the truth of it—that maybe Ivan had been real about the whole thing and was hurting, too. It made Alfred want to reach out and comfort him, but it also made him angry. It was a manipulation tactic.

Alfred: What CAN i say?

Ivan: I do not know.

Alfred: Don't you want to sort this thing out?

Ivan: Yes.

And he didn't go on or clarify. Alfred, scared he was losing him, responded back quickly.

Alfred: If you won't tell me WHY you're a spy, will you tell me how? Just a little bit? How you became like this?

Ivan: It wasn't my fault.

Alfred: How come?

Ivan: I didn't know what was happening at first. I was stupid. I didn't want to be.

Vague. Alfred grumbled to himself. It was somewhat dramatic of a confession, and it served its purpose at stirring some part inside of him that had gone dormant, waking it up. He wanted to lash out and put, *How do I know that's not another lie?* But before he could, Ivan was already typing.

Ivan: I do not know how to say this, but I swear I am not lying here. All of this is true.

It was like the “Mr. FBI” period all over again: Ivan was answering things Alfred hadn’t asked yet. It made Alfred want to smile. It hadn’t been that long ago since he had last watched Ivan, or last seen him irl, sitting on the grass, kissing him innocently on the cheek...

Alfred: Well thanks for telling me.

Ivan: Yes. Now you tell me about how you became FBI and hack into peoples phones and watch them do things for fun.

He—

Alfred near choked.

How could he know? How could he possibly—

Shame overtook him, crawling its way up his stomach, making him sick. A flare of red passed over his face. “Toris,” he wheezed out, reaching over to weakly pat the wall. “Toris, he *knows* .”

A concerned brunet head popped up. Toris’s eyes were wild. “What are you talking about?”

His voice was a whisper. “Ivan *knows* .”

“Knows w-what?”

Alfred set his phone facedown on the desk and wheeled around to regard his coworker, adrenaline speeding through him. “I don’t know! W-Why don’t you tell me? You were the

one who used to watch him all the time when I couldn't! You were the one who knew we had been hacked before Kirkland even told us! You take all the notes! You drive me to all the places! You're the one who thinks this job is problematic and that it's all a 'circle with no end!' You're the one who knows everything! Tell me *why!"*

Ain't nothin' but a heartache ...

"Alfred." Toris reached out and touched his arm in what was, for him, a great display of care. "Breathe. It is okay."

Arthur Kirkland came back to assess the commotion. Even Ludwig and Elizabeta were looking over. "What's happened now?"

Alfred fell hopeless in front of his boss. "Ivan *knows* ," he whispered again, flashing the phone screen. Kirkland studied it again.

The Englishman's eyebrows furrowed. He looked down. He looked back up. His frown cut deeper into his cheeks. He pursed his lips, then opened them. "This is not ideal."

"I don't know *how* ." Maybe Alfred shouldn't have eaten such a snack, because it sure wasn't settling well.

Arthur looked up; he too looked lost, but agitated, like he was lost somewhere and agitated about it. He glanced for a second at Toris, squinted, and then moved back to Alfred. When he spoke his voice was the gravest, most solemn Alfred had ever heard him, and Alfred had heard him say some pretty grave things. "We need to get on that meeting as quick as can be."

Ivan: ;)

Alfred wasn't an eager beaver anymore, however, and now that he thought about more and more about seeing Ivan again and knowing that Ivan *knew* ...he didn't want to go through with it. Embarrassment clogged up his veins, rendering his arms immobile. And shame—not

over the fact that Ivan knew, but over the fact that Alfred was the one feeling bad when Ivan was the one who should feel worse about it. Or was he? He hadn't been caught…

Alfred swallowed the lump in his throat. "Okay."

Arthur Kirkland walked away silently.

There would be outrage.

Alfred forced himself to ignore Toris and type. *I need to see you.*

Ivan: Why can't you just hack my phone again? Then you can see me all you want. Maybe you have not had enough.

Alfred: That's not what I mean.

Ivan: Are my sisters safe?

Alfred: I can't answer that

Ivan: WHY?

Alfred: I don't think we've arrested them yet if that's what you're asking.

Ivan: Tell me everything you know about them and then I'll meet you.

Alfred gulped again. An ultimatum. The drone of the building above him hummed louder in his ears. Without moving, he called to Toris, “What’s the latest on Ivan’s sisters?”

Toris responded in a heartbeat. “They have been questioned separately at least three times each, but have so far proven to be innocent. They are living at a hotel. They also have a lawyer and have arranged for an audience tomorrow at the police station.”

Alfred grunted and relayed all of it to Ivan, including the words *They’re perfectly safe* for good measure. “Tell them to forget the lawyer. There’s a better meeting in the schedule.”

Ivan: And you are not lying?

Alfred: I swear it’s true. He was repeating Ivan’s own words from earlier back to him.

Ivan: Fine. Where do you want to meet?

It had to be someplace public to be cautious, yet not too public to draw attention. Lucky for them, Alfred and Ivan had spent a lot of time together at just the location.

Alfred: the Gardens

Ivan: ...Fine. No weapons. Come alone

And then Alfred felt the weight of their situation fall back down onto him. *No weapons.* Like they would intentionally injure each other? What had they been just a few weeks ago—two bois sitting in the grass, lazily pondering over fortune cookies and conspiracy theories and laughing?

Alfred: No weapons, but i might have to bring some other agents with me. For protocol ig

Ivan: Then I will bring my friends then

So he did have friends.

Alfred left it like that for a couple moments. He peered around: at the top of Toris's head in the next cubicle, at the concentrated shoulders of Ludwig at his own desk, at Héderváry's pantsuit as she moved around near the kitchen, at Kirkland's eyes on him. He wondered how they would all feel about standing under the tree looking out at everything they had been hunting for so long. It was like going into battle, kind of, but the war was silent. And he had a premonition that Ivan wasn't going to look the same.

Alfred: fine by me

Ivan: good

Alfred: great

Ivan: fine

Alfred: peachy keen

Ivan: bee's knees

Alfred: cat's pajamas

Ivan: ...good.

Alfred: gucci

Ivan: never say that please

Alfred: ok

And did he miss it? Being able to see Ivan's face through his computer at the same time they texted, watching Ivan's big nose scrunch up when he laughed, watching his purplish eyes sparkle through the phone camera lens, thinking Alfred was oblivious to how good Alfred made him feel, when really Alfred was wishing Ivan would show this to him in real life—these little, precious, private moments where they thought they weren't together but really they were but really they weren't but really—but *really* —they wanted to be?

Or did he just miss Ivan?

Alfred: just so we're clear on this, can you send me a video of you holding up three fingers or something to prove it's really you? just gotta know

Ivan: yes one sec i will send a link.

.

Did Ivan regret it? Being able to lose himself in Alfred's stolen phone information, the lines of code across the screen, the taste of accomplishment in his mouth, although it was tinged by competitive betrayal and envy and the wanting to get back at Alfred, to connect with him in a dangerous, intense way that he was scared to, in a way neither of them were ever supposed to connect but probably would never have in the first place if they hadn't—but they had?

Or did he just regret losing Alfred?

Whatever the case, he did it anyway. He watched Alfred's expression through his front phone camera lens through his hacker computer as Alfred obliviously opened the link to the infamous YouTube page of Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give You Up."

Chapter End Notes

save as draft - katy

.

HHHHHHHHHHHHHHNNNNHH

wow my heart is rAciNg holy fuuu do you feel it too

(My sincerest apologies to all those who are "from" North Dakota. I've just never really bought it.)

LOL REALLY REALLY REALLY SORRY NOT SORRY FOR ENDING EVERYTHING ON UBER-DRAMATIC CLIFFHANGERS ALL THE TIME BUT GUESS WHAT NEXT CHAPTER IS ANOTHER OFF-PLOT SIXER SO YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS…

do you think you're r e a d y ?

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

the gray division

" *Buonasera* , buttheads. I am here to foil another of your stupid escape plans," Lovino said as he stepped into the hostage room.

Antonio had just been waking up from a rad dream in which he had remembered to tell someone to take care of his turtles while he was gone. He yawned and then stood to attention as, as often, Lovino approached him first.

"I have a present for you," the *mafioso* stated, holding up none other than a roll of duct tape, sounding bored.

Francis gave a low whistle, but Lovino didn't miss a beat. "If you make another noise I will kick you so damn good and hard it will make your man parts malfunction," he informed.

The agent whimpered. "I would appreciate it verily if you did not do that."

Across the room, still propped up against the wall like a dejected garden ornament, Gilbert gave a soft wail. (He had actually been using the position to spy and listen through the walls over the past several days, which helped only when the languages being spoken by the hacker group were one of the two he could understand.) "Ah! What if he counts the plea as another noise? You *need* your man parts, Francis!"

"I *do!* I do so much!" Francis sobbed.

Antonio shook his head sadly. The confinement was starting to affect them. "Rip."

Lovino stared at him. “Do you ever just hate your job, like, to the *extreme* ?”

“Sometimes,” Antonio admitted. “Like I just remembered I forgot to tell someone to look after my turtles. But it is okay! Everyone has bad days. Maybe tomorrow will be a good one, you know?”

Lovino rolled his eyes and tore off three pieces of duct tape from the roll. “Nope. Tomorrow is going to be even worse.”

There was something about tomorrow that was significant, Antonio thought, but he couldn’t quite recall what it was. Gilbert had heard the plans through the wall or something. “How do you know?”

Lovino leaned in and calmly placed a swath of tape over Antonio’s mouth. “Well, first of all, I have to pick up my baby brother…”

.

Agent Ludwig Beilschmidt’s life had changed.

He saw it as he closed down his computer at work and stared at his reflection in the black mirror. *Who am I now?* he wondered. All he could think about, waking and sleeping, were his brother and Feliciano. They were in every aspect of his job, yet it had stopped feeling like it; Ludwig didn’t care if the FBI found the reason for Gilbert’s MIA-ness anymore—he just cared about finding Gilbert. And, he had to admit it: Ludwig didn’t care about knowing if Feliciano was part of something illicit anymore. He just cared about Feliciano.

“This is crazy,” he said to himself, quietly. It wasn’t like there was anyone on the negative two-hundredth floor to hear him, anyway. After obsessing over Ivan Braginsky and the phones all day, Arthur and Alfred had announced that there was a branch-wide meeting with the hackers tomorrow morning at Constitutional Gardens, and then left. Toris departed soon after. Chief Elizabeta Héderváry had stayed, but only so she could finally begin packing away the three unused cubicles. “I guess we will have to replace them for the time being,” she had told Ludwig carefully. “Maybe what we need is a pair of fresh eyes on the case.”

Ludwig felt immense sadness when she handed him a box of his brother’s things, like Gilbert was some fallen soldier. Up until then, Ludwig hadn’t even considered the fact that Gilbert could actually be dead.

“I miss the stupid bastard too,” Elizabeta had admitted in a whisper, and then given Ludwig an awkward pat on the back. Now, she was back upstairs on check-in duty for the rest of the agency, and he had things to do, too, he had things to do…

Right. Feliciano.

Dinner with Feliciano.

It...still wasn’t a date.

He stopped ogling his sad self in the computer, stood, and donned his jacket. (Feliciano had told him before that he looked good in his jacket, but Feliciano had also complimented his spy recording glasses, and look what had happened to them?)

Ever since that fateful Wednesday night, things hadn’t been the same between them. Ludwig was partly distracted by the stuff going down in the rest of the FBI, and Feliciano seemed a little distant as well: he ramble-talked less, fake-smiled more, and most disturbing of all, he had completely stopped touching Ludwig. Like he was afraid to, or was holding himself back, or his manners had suddenly matured overnight. Ludwig wasn’t... *complaining* , but it was technically abnormal behavior, which made Ludwig suspicious, which made Feliciano anxious and on-edge, which wasn’t good for the both of them.

And by now, Ludwig knew in his poor, aching soul that Feliciano's stunt with destroying the glasses—and all the evidence contained within them—had been no accidental mistake. Just as he knew that Feliciano dropping his phone in a pot of boiling water had been intentional, but he could never actually prove anything, and that was what was *most* frustrating. All Ludwig had discerned was that Feliciano was guilty either way—but maybe just because he felt sorry about how things had been going between them? *Do you still like me?*

Ludwig's biggest problem, however, was how, right now, he would just stop, and look at Feliciano for a second, standing there on the street corner where they had planned to meet outside of the restaurant, and Feliciano would wave, and *real* smile, and shout his name, and all doubts in Ludwig's mind would vanish and he would stop and just think to himself *He's so innocent.*

So he sighed and crossed over and said his greeting and they went inside.

Feliciano at least seemed happy today. He was wearing a dapper little outfit with shiny shoes that were probably too expensive for him. "Woo, it's cold in here compared to outside!" he exclaimed, rubbing his shoulders. "I wonder why they always keep restaurants so cold. It really sucks, no? Are you cold?"

Ludwig was feeling pretty hot at the moment, so he just grimaced in response and found their booth. This restaurant was similar to the one they had eaten at before—high-end and low-light and all that jazz. "How are you?" he asked when they were seated with tall, skinny menus that were perfect for hiding red faces.

"Apart from having cold?" Feliciano shrugged. "Okay, I guess. I almost got pooped on by a flock of pigeons, which was exciting. And then a crazy person tried to sell me new drugs, I think! I said no, because my medicine is already enough. But how are you? How is the FBI? Did you catch any bad guys? Have you been sleeping better?"

Ludwig sank back into the cushioned seat. "Things are...difficult. Moreso difficult, and complicated, and confusing, but I am managing. We haven't caught anyone yet. I am sleeping"—a weak cough—"fine." He hoped Feliciano still thought he was strong and couldn't read the fatigue.

“Good, good, *benissimo!* ” The waitress then arrived, and while Feliciano struck up some friendly flirting, Ludwig tried to remember what it was like to have an appetite. At least he felt milder now with the talking. That was one of the reasons he liked dogs better than people: their elated energy opened him up. Feliciano had a similar hyperactivity.

“Are you sure you can afford this?” Ludwig asked after they had ordered. “My apologies, but I know you don’t make much. I do not mind to help pay…”

Feliciano spread his hands out on the table and grinned. “It is okay, I promise! I am taken care of! And if one of us paid for two, it would be a date, right, and you wouldn’t want that, no?”

Ludwig looked at their hands, resting on the polished wood grain. He realized that bringing them together might have been a thing Feliciano would have once done in this situation. And if they were already here, having a fancy dinner together in a fancy restaurant in fancy clothes, with no one that mattered around to see, and nothing else on the agenda save for spending time together...it would be so easy to just move his hand a few inches. He had touched both Feliciano’s hands before—the left hand that had drawn that perfect self-portrait at the police station, the right hand that had nudged Ludwig’s leg under that table. It would be so easy. Feliciano would probably let him. It might help him get warm because he was cold. It might feel good.

Alfred Jones and Ivan Braginsky.

Ludwig tore his eyes away. “Um, you’re right. I’m sorry.”

Feliciano was quick with reassurance. “You do not have to be sorry! You have done nothing wrong and that is silly.”

The waitress came back with their drinks and one of those romantic little electric candles to set on the table. Ludwig wondered if he should just put himself out of his misery, and when he died if he would see his brother.

When food came, they ate in near silence, and Ludwig had to stop periodically to let the heartburn settle. Even though he felt complacent with talking, the moody undercurrents began to frustrate him more and more, until the point where, in the bathroom, he got stuck. After six minutes of scratching soap into his skin, Feliciano came in and carefully turned off the water. “Hey,” he said, and the remaining stress dissolved down the drain the moment their eyes connected in the mirror. “Would you like to go? I think it’s time to go.”

Ludwig tried to shake it off, nodding. “Let’s go. It really is too cold in here.”

They took to the streets. Dusk was creeping over Washington, the stately concrete buildings lit up in streetlight yellows. Feliciano finally began to talk about wonderful meaningless things while Ludwig watched him glow golden. Other couples passed them by, of all classes and races and genders and dog breeds of their own. It was a pleasing scene, so of course it had to come to an end.

“Goodbye,” said Feliciano as they stopped near the metro station. “When will I see you again?”

“I’m not quite sure,” admitted Ludwig. “I have to be at Constitution Gardens tomorrow in the morning, so maybe after that.”

“You are going to Constitution—oh. Well. Okay then!” He gave a cheery wave. “See you soon!”

“See you soon.”

Ludwig watched him walk away for several moments, contemplating contentedly to himself. Something was clicking and ticking deep inside him that he had never felt ever before. It took those several moments to snap into place, and then Ludwig knew what he had to do. He waited until Feliciano was two inches tall down the street, and then he began to follow.

He had never been trained for this, but it couldn’t be that difficult to not be seen if Gilbert had done it, and Gilbert was loud with bright white hair and reddish eyes. So Ludwig clung to the

sides of buildings and just tried to keep his head down, casually ducking into doorways a few times when Feliciano crossed the street.

Crossed the street—

That wasn't the direction of the metro.

Ludwig's heart began to speed up as Feliciano moved farther and farther away from the lights. Why hadn't he thought to do this before? They had kept everything organized so that Feliciano had ways of detecting when he was being watched. But now—

Ludwig's target spun in a circle, checked up and down the street, and then fell into an alleyway up ahead.

Without thinking he ran. This was it. He wished he had a body camera with him now, but there was only the measly canister of mace tucked into his belt. The plan before had been to call for backup. But there was no time—

Feliciano was alone in the alleyway. In his hand, a thick white envelope. Pulling away down the street, a SAVE THE WHALES van.

Feliciano turned and noticed him. Panic immediately struck his eyes. He folded his hands behind his back, and the envelope disappeared. "Ludwig!" His sweet voice wobbled; he was feigning ease.

Ludwig took a silent step forward. His world had imploded inside of him the second he had stepped into this alley, and it took everything to keep his composure intact. "Feliciano."

"What are you doing?" Feliciano took a half-step back when Ludwig continued his advance. "I mean, are you lost? Are you okay? What are you— *Ludwig* !"

Ludwig seized the man, wrapping him in a tight embrace. He had no other choice; he had seen how fast Feliciano could run if he escaped. Ludwig needed to call backup fast, or at least let someone know where he was before they were caught. He wasn't dumb. Feliciano was probably being watched right now. Feliciano, it turned out, definitely wasn't dumb, either.

He squirmed a little in Ludwig's hold, blurting out a high, quick exclamation of surprise. "Why are you hugging me?"

Ludwig grimaced and decided to go with it. He readjusted his grasp. "Um…I just...wanted to hug you before you left."

Feliciano stared into him. Finally, he grinned. "Really?"

Agent Beilschmidt was in a state of perplexion. "Yes," he relayed on instinct. He could feel Feliciano's heart beating very fast and knew his own was doing the same. It was like the last hour was nonexistent. When was the last time he had been this close to someone?

"Aw, Ludwig," Feliciano crooned. Seemingly pleased, he began to hug the stunned Ludwig as well. Ludwig knew he was supposed to be terrified by this move—Feliciano's hands smoothing down Ludwig's back made Ludwig grateful he had tucked the mace against his hip instead. Now if Ludwig could only move his *own* hands into his jacket pocket, where he kept his phone...

But Feliciano rested his cheek on the crook of Ludwig's shoulder. They swayed slightly. His hair danced against Ludwig's neck, and he smelled like murder and cologne. It was a very nice smell, Ludwig thought. *We're in a shady back alley* , Ludwig also thought. "Want to know a secret? I like you very much," Feliciano thought aloud.

Ludwig resisted the urge to let out a delirious bark of laughter. He was done for. They would never find his body. He couldn't think—he couldn't think—he couldn't move. He needed to reach for help.

Instead, he dipped his head down and kissed Feliciano.

Everything was given to wild abandon. Ludwig had never kissed anyone before, but Feliciano obviously had, the way he responded instantly with such surefire vigor. Ludwig felt a wonderful release of everything he had been holding in; he had wanted this since he had watched and listened to Feliciano over the phone; he had wanted this since Héderváry had scolded them at the police station; he had wanted this since he had worked together distributing vegetables with Feliciano under the hot sun. Feliciano burned like a sun himself, warm and bright and passionate in his arms, and everything Ludwig had imagined him to be.

Not quite knowing what he was doing, he combed his fingers through Feliciano's beautiful auburn hair and was delighted to feel Feliciano's lips form a smile against his. Ludwig kissed him on the cheek, and kissed him on the forehead over his beautiful brown eyes. Feliciano was giggling, rubbing Ludwig's sides, his hands moving up over Ludwig's chest, over his collarbone, his neck, at his throat…poking him in the throat…prodding him sharply… uncomfortable—

It was a knife.

Scheiße.

Like a sloth waking from a dream, Ludwig pulled away. "I never trusted you," he stated, simply, as if that had been the plan all along.

"I'm so, so sorry, Ludwig." Feliciano was still holding him, but had somehow conjured up a blade and was holding that to him as well. His beautiful face was perfectly, purely sympathetic. "I have no choice."

"I know." Ludwig didn't doubt that he could wrestle his way out of this, but the thought of overpowering Feliciano was so distant in his mind when he had already clearly been defeated. He found himself unable to feel anything, he was in such shock. "Just go."

"I need you to turn around first," Feliciano whispered. He gently began to direct Ludwig in a spinning motion.

Ludwig obeyed. He stared at the sticky, graffiti-covered alley wall, felt the tip of the knife inches from his spinal cord, and wondered at what point in his life things had gone wrong.

He felt Feliciano's hands on his hips, and then a weight disappeared from his belt. Great; now his mace was gone. Had the sneaky Italian planned this? Feliciano lifted Ludwig's jacket, searching for more weapons. He plucked out the cell phone instead. With a final pat on the back—was it supposed to be reassuring?—Feliciano began to speak.

"This might feel funny. I'm so sorry, Ludwig." His voice cracked. "I'm so sorr—"

Ludwig whirled around. "Wait a second. Your right hand."

Feliciano's face was red. "What?"

Ludwig stepped forward, and the intimidation tactic worked again; Feliciano stepped back. "You are left-handed, correct? You drew with your left hand! But now you're holding the knife with your right! The criminal used his right hand! So you *are* the—"

Feliciano's eyes weren't on him, however. They followed something moving further down the alley. It took less than a second for them to dart back. "I'm sorry, Ludwig," he repeated quieter. Ludwig turned and looked, but it was too late. The world had come to a screeching halt.

When he woke his head was pounding and everything was a very cliché sort of black.

It took a little while for his hearing to pop back into place, and his darkened vision was a swimmy, polka-dotted haze that reminded him of when he would try to use his reading glasses to see regularly. That was the first thought that traversed his stunted brain—wondering where his glasses were. Hadn't he gotten new ones? Special ones? Broken ones. The metro. Dinner. The alley. Feliciano.

Ludwig struggled to move and was rewarded with another wave of nauseating headache. He appeared to be tied to a chair, his hands secured behind his back. He couldn't see anything (had he gone blind—did blind people see a swimmy dotty black haze?), but muffled, humanlike noises were coming from somewhere close by, a few meters behind him. Ludwig couldn't turn around to see what or who it was. Suddenly a door opened in front of him and his attention was diverted.

The light that spilled into the room blinded Ludwig for a second, and he only caught a glimpse of the trim of the hallway beyond before a figure stepped in. Ludwig blinked and then blinked again, trying to chase away the spots. It was Feliciano.

He came to a stop in front of Ludwig and crossed his arms, sticking out a hip and letting out a huff. His voice was harsh and earsplitting; Ludwig jumped. "Are you *awake* yet, you stupid FBI bastard? Rise and fucking shine; it is about time. I heard some annoying noises." More muffled grunts and wails from the back. "Shut it, assfaces!"

If Ludwig hadn't already been hopelessly bamboozled beyond his years, he was now. He tried to speak. "Where am I?"

Feliciano laughed and it was off-key and terrifying. "Somewhere you won't be for long, so party up while you still can, potatohead. There is four of you now. Almost the full shitting set!"

Well, this was a trip. Ludwig had never once heard Feliciano curse, even when he was alone. "Why?" Ludwig pushed out. "Why am I here? We were on the street! You had an envelope! You *kissed* me!"

Feliciano froze, and Ludwig swore the temperature in the room dropped along with him. "I did *what* with you?"

"You *ki* —"

"Oh my *God* , *no* , do not *repeat* that damnation!" Feliciano took a deep breath, crossed himself, and then turned stiffly around and screamed something loud and angry and Italian

out the door.

A second Feliciano timidly popped his head in. “I can explain.”

Ludwig inhaled; what did they have him *on* ?

The two Felicianos began a rapid and frustrated doorway dialogue in their native language, and slowly he realized that the first Feliciano wasn’t Feliciano at all, but someone else that happened to bear his likeness. Someone else that maybe could be mistaken for Feliciano in a certain atmosphere. Ludwig took the time of their argument to clunkily connect the dots.

“You have a brother,” he blurted out. “In Italy.”

Feliciano—the real one—gulped, and then, even in the dim lighting, all of it became obvious to Ludwig. He wanted to rack himself upside the head. Why hadn’t they considered Feliciano’s brother before?

“My name is *Lovino* ,” spat Lovino. “And we’re not in *Italy* .”

“No, we are not,” Ludwig stated.

“But how the hell would you know? You’re tied to a chair!” Lovino narrowed his eyes. “I don’t like you.” Jerked his head to Feliciano. “You have five minutes to deal with this, and then we have to start getting ready.”

Feliciano trembled. “Okay.”

Lovino left, slamming the door in his wake. Feliciano just stood there, not bothering with turning on a light, if there even was one. Ludwig’s eyes had adjusted to the dark, anyway. He could do nothing but warily watch Feliciano as he slowly, slowly moved toward him. A few

heartbeats passed in which Ludwig refused to speak. And then, as if the night hadn't been dramatic enough, Feliciano fell to his knees and burst into sobs.

"I'm so sorry!" he wailed, scooting forward to cry on Ludwig's lap. "I swear to you, I never meant for this to happen! But I *had* to, you see, and—oh!" More sobbing. His whole body shook.

Ludwig was more than perturbed. If anyone should be crying, it should be himself! Here he was, dumbfounded, outsmarted, locked in a room, tied to a chair. His own brother was *dead.* His workplace was in chaos. His emotions had been toyed with until he didn't know what was real and what was supposed to have been kept buried. And worst of all, Feliciano was crying on his lap, and that made him uncomfortable, and he didn't want to see Feliciano crying. Feliciano looked better when he was happy and smiling. "Stop," he mumbled. "Do not do this."

Feliciano looked up at him. He hiccupped. "W-What?"

"I just want you to explain why." Ludwig locked him in his gaze, willing him not to flinch away. "All of this, why? You lied about so much. Is your whole family here, then? Your grandfather, too?"

"No, Ludwig." A sniffle. "Grandpa has been dead for five years."

The small room got quiet. Even the noises in the back stopped. "Oh," said Ludwig.

"It was cancer." Heartbreak flickered in his expression. "Lovino and I had nowhere to go. We would have lost everything if not for…"

"The Mafia," Ludwig finished, because what else could be the answer.

Feliciano wiped at his face. "Grandpa had unpaid debts," he explained, "and we were trapped. It was mostly trading weapons, selling and buying from a friend in the black market.

And then Felicks heard from hackers he knows about things happening in America, in the FBI. People were watching us. Doing bad things to our phones and computers. This mission was supposed to be the one that fixed us for the Mafia forever. Lovino was to k-kidnap the agents, and I—”

“You were the decoy.” Ludwig was catching up. “In case something happened.”

Feliciano nodded, his chin trembling. “You happened. I could do nothing. You watching me everywhere always all the time...I could not move.”

Ludwig started to feel dizzy again. “The Mafia is an organization of criminals, Feliciano, and you are admitting that you are one of them. But I am still confused. If your brother really did all the work and the kidnappings, then how did you…”

“I am ambidextrous,” he whispered, and he put up his hands like he was surrendering. “I can use both.” Ludwig fought to move his own hands against the chair, struck with wanting to hold Feliciano again and wipe away all the tears. “And I still don’t want to hurt anyone.”

The words fell out before Ludwig could bite them back. “You hurt me.” Was it true? And if it was, hadn’t he done the same?

Feliciano’s eyes went wide. His voice was soft, almost pleading. “But—you kissed me.”

Ludwig didn’t have the energy to even be embarrassed. “Because you made me love you.”

A single tear cut over Feliciano’s cheek and plopped onto Ludwig’s knee. “L-Love is supposed to be a really good thing, is it not?”

“I don’t know anymore,” Ludwig sighed. He called it love. He wasn’t sure that was what it really was, but it ticked inside of him now, alive and new, and before Feliciano he was certain there had been nothing. “I was—I was afraid it would turn out like it did for Jones and Braginsky.” He paused, then realizing Alfred had never said outright that he and Ivan had

been in love. But they had to have been, otherwise Alfred wouldn't have seemed so shaken, or cared so much, or acted so differently the past weeks. Ludwig knew love changed people, and their consequences *had* been grave. "Do you know who they are?"

Feliciano slowly shook his head, his shoulders quivering. It was impossible to tell if he was fibbing. "Maybe."

"I guess you will discover soon enough."

"I know what is going to happen, I think. They are going to try to exchange you as a hostage."

Ludwig gritted his teeth. He wished he could force himself to relax; he was still thinking in fragments and tangents. "And what are you going to do?"

"I'm not s-sure yet," Feliciano whispered. "I'm not sure they will let me do anything."

"Why not?"

Feliciano searched his face for a second, and then quickly pushed upwards, kissing Ludwig once on the lips. "Because you made me love you, too."

There was something far away in Feliciano's eyes that wasn't tears or sorrow—something nostalgic, yet unregretful, even as Lovino's yell came from through the walls, reminding them both to come back to earth. But Ludwig was...wondering.

As Feliciano sank his head onto Ludwig's collarbone and sniffed some more, Ludwig silently leaned into him. He breathed out, "Would you be an artist if you could? Or a farmer like your job now? Or an actor, perhaps?"

“Those all sound good,” Feliciano mumbled back. “I do not know. I quit college. I’m not smart enough. I would like to just...live.” He looked up. “What would you be if you were not FBI?”

“I do not know.” He really didn’t. A good portion of his life had been built around trying to get to his current position, and look where it had landed him—tied to a chair in a dark room with a bruised heart. “Some other government, I suppose. Some other office, though I do like the outdoors.”

“Everyone says you should do what makes you happy,” Feliciano said, trying for a smile.

“But you can only do that if you’re truly free,” Ludwig retorted. “And at the moment, neither of us are.”

“Feliciano, hai finito? Ho detto andiamo!”

Feliciano took a few seconds to wobble to his feet, shaking off any remaining tears, and Ludwig found he did not want him to leave. He still had no idea where he was, and no idea how much time had passed since his passing out. It could be morning already. If so, thought Ludwig in some distant corner of his mind, it was probably the longest sleep he had gotten in ages.

“Don’t leave me alone like this,” Ludwig warned, but Feliciano shushed him. (Actually shushed him! The audacity...)

“I’m so sorry, Ludwig. I cannot tell you that enough. But you will not be alone, I promise.” He shifted Ludwig’s chair a bit, and then crossed behind him. Ludwig had completely disregarded the room’s extraneous noises until he heard three sounds like bandages being pulled off, heavy breathing, grunts, and more shushing.

“What’s going on?” Ludwig asked. Feliciano moved quickly back to the front of the room and opened the door.

“You said it—we will find out soon. And hopefully this will not be the last time we see each other.” He opened the door and leaned against the frame, giving a last wistful look.

“Wait! I am not done with you!” Ludwig called out, struggling against his bonds. He imagined Feliciano had felt this exact helplessness.

Feliciano was smiling. Real or fake or unsure was undetermined, but there it was, faintly on his lips, the lips Ludwig had tasted twice now and still yearned for. “I am not done with you, either.”

Oh, *that* was real cute. Damn him and his handsome, aggravating self. Ludwig wanted to scream but was once again interrupted.

The second the door closed, a familiar raspy voice spoke up from the back. “ *Mein Gott,* what a show!”

Ludwig’s neck whipped around faster than a falling bowling ball. “ *Gilbert!* ”

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“ *Ludwig!* ”

“You’ve been in this room the whole time?!”

“I know, right! Duct tape! Fucking, on my mouth! You have a boyfriend?!”

“It is not what it looks like!”

“Oh, is it now? Are you old enough? Did I say you were ready to have boyfriends, Ludwig?”

“What the hell? I am an adult and an FBI agent; I should think I’m well ready!”

“He’s the Mafia! But I guess that does not mean a thing to you people, does it. Toni’s got the bits for the shorty shouty one. And that kid *Alfred?* Totally would have guessed. *Blegh.* Hey, wake up, you *dummkopf!* Tell my young, innocent baby brother all about your verbal abuse kink!”

Antonio sputtered. “Hey, come on! Don’t shame me! We are all tied to chairs as equals here!”

Ludwig gaped. “And you’re all *here!* You are really alive! We thought you were going to be MIA forever!”

Francis fake-swooned. (He had been practicing his fake-swoon a lot these days.) “Oh, *oui* . Thank the sweet boy for letting us speak. That was a marvelous display. You must be so damaged! If my hands were free I would be clapping!”

Ludwig looked like he wished Feliciano had left the duct-tape on. Gilbert readjusted his neck against the wall. Behind it, he could still hear Lovino and Feliciano having a muffled discussion in Italian. God was he glad to see an old new face. “So...tell me. How goes it. What have you been up to? Is there anything *else* you have neglected to tell me?”

“Gilbert. You have been missing for weeks. Tied to a chair this whole time, probably, and you’re asking *wie geht’s* to *me* ? Have you gone insane?”

“Probably.”

“The food is super good, though,” Antonio perked up.

Francis blew air out of his cheeks. “Ah, *très bien* . And they finally let me take a shower a few days ago. I still smell faintly of lavender and honey.”

Ludwig’s eyes were bloodshot. “We’re all going to die.”

“Nah,” assured Gilbert. “We’ve got a plan. A *real* one this time.” The two others nodded furiously along. “We can’t move now, because they are here and they will notice and there is nowhere to go, but we have been listening. Tomorrow when they take us out, during the exchange, we break free.”

“And...how are you going to do that? When did you make this plan?”

Gilbert pointed with his eyebrows. “Well, about five minutes ago was when it truly all fell into place. Look over there on the floor. I don’t know if it was on purpose or not, but during all the crying and hugging and depressing stuff, your boyfriend dropped his knife.”

Chapter End Notes

scheiße - lady gaga

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It's 5,349-word-long chapters like these (longest of the book so far I think!) that remind me why I keep writing.

Days have been hella rough. Life has been hella tough. School has hella sucked. You can probably see where my stress bled into the story at certain points, but I wrote both the more lighthearted BTT parts today, because today, my folks, has been a hella. awesome. day.

This is one of the chapters I've been waiting to write since the dawn of this idea where I didn't even know where it was going or how it got there, so I spent some extra time on it, and I'm still figuring stuff out, both in here and out there in the real world. Sometimes I wish I could know all you amazing readers and responders irl, because the majority of close ones I have irl don't read my stuff and it gets me really down sometimes. But like

Antonio so kindly put it, everyone has bad days. You just gotta get through them and live to the fullest I guess because you never know what can happen.

SO. ;) Six chapters left. I'll be busy.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Matthew Williams, Chief of Police, Washington, D.C. stood in the parking lot outside headquarters on the morning of the showdown, a Monday that marked three weeks since Ivan Braginsky had started talking to Mr. FBI. Matt assessed the shoddy assembly of his friends, colleagues, and his brother. He began to sweat and pushed his glasses up his nose. “The gang’s all here, eh?”

“Ludwig is *gone* ,” Arthur Kirkland grumbled.

“And, another plot twist: Toris is a *spy* ,” Alfred F. Jones echoed.

Arthur batted a careless hand. “But we *totally* knew that already.”

“Francis, Antonio, and Gilbert are still unaccounted for…” chimed in Elizabeta Héderváry.

“And Kiku said he’ll just meet us there,” Alfred continued.

Officer Carlos Machado scratched through his dreads. He was wearing a floral-print shirt, his gun belt, and a half-smile. “Well, boys and madam, *I* woke up this morning optimistic, so we gonna go with that. Let’s roll out.”

Alfred gave him the stinkeye; he wanted to groan out loud. He had almost thrown up all his nerves that morning just getting ready for this. Today he was going to see Ivan again. They would be at Constitution Gardens, the center of DC, the place where Ivan and Alfred had met —had gone on their first date. The park was private enough, but Alfred’s heart was in practically more turmoil than the dysfunctional FBI divisions. He turned to his boss and softly whined, “Mr. Kirkland, I don’t feel so good. I don’t wanna go.”

The midday sun beamed off of Kirkland's badge. His gaze was on the horizon, his stature uneasy, pieces of his hair lifting slightly on the ghost of a breeze. Was that a trick of the light, or was that a gray hair? Alfred almost wondered what inner demons he himself was battling; the old Englishman was the epitome of rumination. Arthur mumbled to himself, "I think I left the oven on."

Matthew sucked in a breath, looked at Alfred, and sighed. "I guess we're ready, then."

"No, we are not," a tired-sounding voice answered. The small crowd parted, and there stood Natalya and Yekaterina at the front of the lot. They were both wearing sunglasses and the formalest of vacation rompers.

"Where is Ivan?" Yekaterina asked. The question was timid, but heavy with emotion, and gave the impression that she was done hearing excuses. "You said there was a meeting today."

Natalya treaded right up to Alfred. He didn't back down, but his face began to itch, reminded of the sting when she had slapped him. She didn't look angry anymore, however, when she took off her shades and met his eyes. It was a look that had been trying to hold onto confidence for a long time and was feeling the first notes of creeping doubt. "I know you are important to him. You know *something* . Everyone of you know *something* . All we want is you take us to him now, or we swear we will sue."

On what grounds? Alfred might have challenged a few weeks ago. Today, he knew better. "We were actually just on our way to meet him. Your sister's right. But—he's going to be with his other hacker friends and criminals, just so you know. It was arranged this way."

A flicker of pain crossed her face, but she said nothing. Matt leaned in and softly offered, "We can give you a ride there, but I'm afraid you'll have to stay in the car at least until we figure things out. It might be safer like that, too."

Natalya closed her eyes for a second of frustration. She turned to Yekaterina and said something, and then Yekaterina put her head in her hands and groaned something back. Finally, Natalya turned back and nodded slowly. "We will come."

Elizabeta nodded. “And we will do our best to take care of you both, and Ivan. Trust me, it is in our best intentions.”

Natalya stared at her bleakly. “I do not know if I even trust myself after all this.”

Alfred felt a newfound appreciation for her. It took real guts to go this far to defend someone you cared about, especially in a new country and out of the blue like this. She and Yekaterina were probably stronger than all of them, but they were in for a rude awakening. If the plan worked and the forces managed to capture and jail Ivan a second time, there would be no chance they would ever get to see him again for a long, long while.

And that would mean Alfred would have to let go of Ivan as well—for real. For legit.

And, just like them, he didn’t know if that was a thing he could possibly do.

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When Ivan had woken up that morning his entire body had been cold.

He normally didn’t shift too much during sleep or kick his blankets around in the night, but there they were, bunched in a pile toward the end of his bed, and there he was, splayed out all over his pillow and computer, which rested in the bed with him. He blearily recalled that he had been rereading the messages and watching Alfred in the evening, and strange crying and shouting from down the hall had woken him up many times throughout the night. Ivan sat up and tried to focus. A shower warmed him, but only slightly.

When he emerged for breakfast wearing his scarf and regular day clothes, he found the tiny apartment in motion. Raivis was walking in a little circle by the door, feeding some concerned language into his cell phone. Eduard seemed like he was trying to pack away breakfast and prepare for the meeting at the same time; he had wires in one hand and

notecards in the other, and Ivan did a double take when he realized Eduard was wearing a casual suit instead of his striped pajamas for once. He stole a bread roll off of its plate before the hacker extraordinaire could whisk it away.

Felicks was hogging up the bathroom, so Ivan began to walk back to his room when he noticed that a hallway door—the one normally chained and dead-bolted—was swinging wide open. He gave a curious glance inside and found a completely empty room.

" *Scusi* ," said someone behind him. Ivan moved out of the way of a nicely-dressed young man whom he could only describe as a lighter-haired, bouncier, higher-timbred version of Lovino. The other Vargas, then—Feliciano. Behind him followed Lovino—who carried a gun.

"Do not look in there because they are gone," Lovino told Ivan. "Thank the Lord, thank the Heaven, they are gone."

Ivan again felt his internal temperature plunge. He all but whispered, "Did you... *kill* them?"

Lovino stared. "I wish I damn did. No, they are the hostages."

"They are safe in the truck now," Feliciano affirmed. He then squinted, and popped his eyes open wide. "Oh, hi! Are you Ivan who is in love with Alfred? I understand you! I am Feliciano. I am in love with Ludwig and he is one of the hostages, and he is also an FBI agent! Nice to finally meet you, I guess."

Lovino immediately scoffed and pushed past them.

Ivan wasn't sure if he had heard correctly. His heart was just beginning to beat again. "Um, yes. Thanks, I hate it."

"It is a very funny kind of dramatic, I think," Feliciano acknowledged, waving his hands. "And tense. Lots of tense. And sad. There is the sad, too."

But Ivan was still hung up on how the small Italian had said “in love with Alfred.” If he was in love with Alfred, they certainly hadn’t mentioned it to each other. Love was an important word in both Russian and whatever else the two of them spoke, sometimes even internet lingo included. But things had moved so fast—had they just not had the chance? Did it matter?

“Whatever you just said is describing it perfectly,” Ivan replied, curling his fingers into his scarf. He was going to try to make another comment when Felicks exploded out of the bathroom ahead of them.

“He just texted! He’s almost here!” Felicks shrieked. He was wearing something suave as well, and Ivan wasn’t sure what stood out more: the fedora, the fanny pack, the knife-pleated skirt, or the rifle strapped to his back.

Ivan’s big mood, already conflicted, confused, and confounded, wasn’t improving. He had so many questions, including, but not limited to “We are not going to actually fight them, right?” and “What the fuck? Is this allowed? Is that *allowed?* ” but only one of them was answered by what happened next.

There was a knock on the apartment’s front door and everybody stopped what they were doing and stilled. Lovino reached out to brush his brother’s arm. Raivis, the closest, gently hung up on his phone. Eduard had dropped a plate but miraculously managed to catch it before it hit the ground. Felicks silently moved to the center of the room.

Mufflings from the other side of the door, and then a male voice Ivan had never heard before timidly said through the wood, “Uh, it’s me. Sorry. I forgot the secret knock.”

Everyone seemed to relax. Raivis gratefully stepped forward, peeped through the peephole, and opened—for a familiar-looking man who was wearing an FBI uniform.

Ivan shuddered and moved backwards, about to call out, when he realized no one else was doing the same. In fact, they were doing the opposite. Eduard and Raivis were smiling and giving greetings, and Felicks was waiting for the man’s approach with an anxious tapping foot.

The agent had shoulder-length, light-brown hair and a cautious face when he beheld Ivan's reaction. Recognition passed between them and he seemed to wince and flinch a little, but didn't back down. Ivan had seen this man before, hadn't he? In the holding cell room, this man had been there: silent, in the background, unnoticed, unsuspecting, but he had been there and seen everything. He knew who Ivan was, at least, and Ivan didn't like that.

"Why are you here?" Ivan asked, the question coming straight from his dry throat.

The agent gulped and rearranged his expression into something polite. "Hello, I am Toris. Um, I know this sounds strange, but you might know me because of—"

"You do not have to say his name," Ivan uttered. Alfred had talked about his coworkers minimally since he had been trying to conceal his real job, of course, and perhaps Toris had been one of them. But that still didn't explain why he was here.

"I apologize," the agent finished, his eyes widening in apprehension. "I—I understand how tricky of a situation it can be, Ivan."

No, you don't , Ivan wanted to growl. He wasn't sure how to feel about all these new people coming up to him and telling him they "understood."

Felicks took the liberty of interrupting them, crossing his arms and pouting at Toris. "Um, excuse me, who am *I?* "

"Ah, yes." Toris remembered himself and tried for a wider smile. He set down his suitcase, walked over, and promptly gave Felicks a kiss on the cheek. "And hello, my Felicks."

Ivan had only thought he was well-adapted to whiplash before. He turned and silently begged explanation from anyone, *anyone* in the room. Eduard just nodded and offered up another typicality: "We will explain in the car. Come on, everyone! We're going to be late, and to the FBI, that is not fashionable!"

And that was how Ivan found himself squashed between Raivis and Eduard in the backseat of another SAVE THE WHALES van en route to the meeting destination, his laptop clutched in his arms (showing a live broadcast of Alfred's phone), his legs bent into weird positions to fit for Toris and Felicks in front of them, and his ears ringing with the sounds of the Mafia and the hostages tumbling around in the cargo hold behind him.

"We've been together for for *ever* ," Felicks was saying. He and Toris were leaning all over each other, Toris partially immersed in his phone, Felicks awkwardly adjusting around his rifle. "Before he started watching me on the phone, in fact. We are, like, a *perfect* team."

Ivan was slowly putting it together. "He is your Mr. FBI? You have one, too?"

"Felicks *is* a wanted criminal," declared Toris, looking up. "My work for the government was to watch him, and my work for us was to watch the government."

A double agent, then. A spy within a spy, who had both God and anime on his side. "You are the reason we can know so much, like schedules and things. I have been wondering! They don't tell me things. Let me guess: you were what they called my 'backup,' too?"

Toris winced again in harmony with Eduard and Raivis, but nodded. "In a sense. I do take lots of notes." An angry yelp came from the cargo hold.

Ivan squeezed his shoulders together, not so keen to be cozy anymore. He was exhausted of asking questions and getting excuses and half-answers and multitudes of "we'll explain later." He decided to just remain silent and wait it out. Toris was polite and likeable at the least, and at the least, he was one more person to back them up. Kind of.

On Ivan's computer screen, Alfred seemed to be texting his friend Kiku. Surrounding Alfred's face was a canopy of green over a pleasant blue sky; he was already there. Ivan explored Alfred's concentrated expression, reading the stressed, squinted lines on his face, the anticipation in his eyes. His messages to Kiku were brief and distracted, segmented into separate thoughts. He looked up constantly, scanned his surroundings, spoke with his coworkers, and looked back down. Mumbled things to himself. Started to hum a tune but never finished it.

Ivan was compelled to touch the screen. Alfred had never let him see this weak, anxious side of himself, and it was intimate that Ivan got to see it now, but he still felt dirty, because he knew that spying was the wrong way to go about doing it. He knew he *wanted* to feel a competitive confidence boost by drinking in the image, but he also knew Alfred might have seen Ivan this way himself, and Ivan wouldn't have wanted to let him see that, either.

"Almost there," informed Raivis. The mood in the cabin dimmed.

"I want to do talking to Alfred," Ivan decided on his own. "No one else. He is nervous, and I think he will want to talk with me, too."

Toris looked back at him. "And are you nervous, as well?"

Ivan closed his eyes. "I really just want to go home away from all this." He stroked along his scarf's downiness, tucking his chin into it. "See my sisters." But he didn't want to see his sisters. He didn't want to see Alfred, and he didn't want to see hackers and FBI agents. He wanted to start over again and make friends that he didn't have to lie to, that didn't have to lie to him, that he would never doubt if they cared for him, if they loved him. But once again, he was stuck somewhere he didn't want to be.

The SAVE THE WHALES van parked on the north side of the Gardens right behind the infamous Yao Wang's *Wok & Roll* food truck.

(When Ivan disembarked he approached the truck out of curiosity, but found it apparently closed, the serving window hatch down, the paper lanterns standing still. However. When he pressed his ear up against the side, totally not in the fashion of some lonely street stalker, he heard the telltale music.)

"Feli, I swear to god…listen! If anyone removes this duct tape again, I will personally deliver your ass to you on *un piatto d'argento* ." Ivan didn't know what *un piatto d'argento* was, but he turned anyway at the sound of Lovino's voice.

The brothers were leading the four hostages out of the back of the van. Ivan felt awkward seeing them irl for the first time when they had been in such proximity before—their eyes were slightly squinty and their legs were slightly bent and their skin was slightly bleached after sitting in the dark for so long. However. Newly duct-taped mouths and everything, it was obvious that all of them (except for the buff blond one to whom Feliciano was attached at the hip) were grinning. Lovino seemed to notice this and lightly slapped the brunet on his zip-tied wrists. “Yeah, you better be happy, bastard. The hell.”

“Thanks so much!” Raivis called to the van’s driver, slipping her a green and then swiveling to face the group. He looked adorable in his promotional baseball cap and kiddie backpack; into it Eduard had slipped their computers and miscellaneous electronic whatnot in the case they would need them. “Okay. Um. A-Are we ready to go, or do we need a couple more vodkas first?”

“Bless,” mumbled Ivan as a cheer went up all around. (One of the cheers even came from the palest of the FBI hostages, muffle and all, but they all chose to ignore it.)

And so Toris and Felicks took the lead, strolling down one of the park’s paths leading a mix-matched squadron of semi-armed international felons and four captives. The sun was out and the guns were out; when they got a few questioning stares, Raivis blurted the magic words “Civil War reenactment,” and all seemed to make sense to the poor Washingtonians. Ivan’s American history wasn’t outstanding, but he felt that his march of dread and the chaos running through his head were authentic enough.

In Constitution Gardens, there was a pond, and in the middle of that pond there was a small, lopsided island that Ivan had never actually checked out or paid much attention to before. Access to it was linked to the path via wooden footbridge. The FBI agents—or what was left of them in all their threefold glory—were waiting on the other side, and with them stood two cops whom Ivan guessed were only there for moral support.

“They look so sad,” Toris voiced quietly to Felicks, echoing Ivan’s thoughts. Felicks snorted in cocky affirmation, but yet had begun to drift behind.

Ivan was doing the same; Feliciano accidentally stepped on his ankle and apologized. They were crossing the bridge. There was some sort of mini-memorial on the island—a semicircle of stone blocks, each containing an ancient-looking engraved name, but Ivan wasn’t admiring the scenery. Ivan was trying not to look at Alfred, who was wearing sunglasses, which made

him look hot, which made Ivan want sunglasses. And Alfred wasn't smiling, but he still was wearing the sunglasses and he still looked overly confident, which let Ivan know that he was definitely hiding the parts of him that weren't. When the two groups got close enough, Alfred was the first to open his mouth to speak. Ivan took a deep breath, expecting a semi-formal "Well, well, well," or something of the sort, but what came out of Alfred's mouth wasn't even directed at him.

It was a frustrated, impromptu whine. " *Tooooooooris!* This whole time! You were my work buddy! Oh my *god* ! You drove me places! Covered shifts for me! I even paid you to clean my house that one time, remember that? I can't believe it! You—you've joined the path of the dark side!"

The man next to Alfred, the English-sounding Chief Kirkland guy if Ivan remembered correctly, sniffed in a very English-sounding manner. He looked stuffy in his full uniform. "Which we knew. We *did* know this. *I* knew this. Ahem." He beheld the group, disgusted. "Yes. Why'd you do it, Toris, you sorry sod."

"Um. My apologies," mumbled Toris, sounding more like he was being embarrassed in front of the cool kids on the playground than he was sorry. He glanced back at Eduard and Raivis. "Someone help please."

Toris gave Felicks a little look of encouragement, and after a second, Felicks stood up straight. "Um, hello. I represent, like, the international black market, sort of. If you do not know, my name is Felicks."

Kirkland snarled and crossed his arms, glancing between the two. His voice was the low, deep-throated grumble of realization. "Nice skirt. Yes, we know *you* ."

Another slow second passed, and then for full late-reaction effect Alfred let out a dramatic gasp, throwing his hands over his head. "*No. ¿Qué pasa? Noooo."*

Felicks gave a simper. "Yes. And thanks." Then he motioned to everyone behind him. "I actually have something for you. There is more people you might know."

They all stepped aside to reveal the hostaged FBI agents who had been missing in action for weeks.

Ivan had to admit, it was the cherry on top to watch the agents and the police go absolutely ballistic over this. Chief Kirkland's mouth fell wide open and he exclaimed, "Francis Bonnefoy is *not* gone!"

Francis Bonnefoy narrowed his eyes at that but did not—probably because he *could* not—respond.

The leading lady of the FBI group stepped forward, her hands clenched in frustrated fists at her sides. "Dear holy Lord *fuck* , this is happening so fast! Can we back up? Let's back up. My name is Elizabeta Héderváry, Chief of all those idiots you have kidnapped and mistakenly thought were valuable." Glares all around. "Oh, excluding Ludwig. You are valid, Ludwig! You know, why is there such a surplus of men in this story in the first place? Ugh. Will the rest of you who I do not already know please make my acquaintance, if you are willing?"

Something in her voice already told Ivan not that this person wasn't going to say "please" twice. He stiffened when Felicks looked pointedly at him.

"Um, *privet* ," he stammered. "I think we are already familiar, but just in case, I am Ivan."

Alfred crossed his arms, mirroring his boss. His expression was unreadable. "Hi, Ivan."

Ivan frowned. Should he cross his arms as well? He was too sweaty for that, so he just left them at his sides, but made sure to try to hold himself with more purpose. "Hi, Alfred."

"Mmm. Yes. Next," Elizabeta dictated, rubbing her chin.

Raivis respectfully took off his baseball cap when she trained her gaze on him. His voice wobbled at first when he gave his name and greeting, but to his credit it steadied out as he

went on. “I am our group coordinator, and I work part-time with certain factions of SAVE THE WHALES.”

Héderváry pursed her lips, in slight disbelief. “You?”

“So the whale people *were* involved! Great.” Kirkland shook his head. “What’s worse than a hacker?”

Ivan, his mind on overdrive, didn’t miss a beat and responded instantly out of instinct. “A child. Boom.”

Raivis stepped back, and Ivan immediately blushed; Alfred’s mouth twitched, but besides raising his eyebrows and folding over his lips he didn’t respond. Was he trying not to smile? Could that be possible? Kirkland looked mildly confused but didn’t say anything at the outburst either.

Eduard was up next, and he was ready. He had even prepared note cards to aid his speech, and being he had an essential role in an essential part of the group’s antics, he felt it necessary to put in some perspective. As the cops shifted and shuffled, he straightened, and took a deep breath, and announced himself.

Everyone listened: “The reason I founded this circle of vigilantes was because, during our actions as vigilantes, we happened upon a plot even more nefarious.”

(Eduard had asked Ivan and the rest with help using the right English words to as such illustrate the dramatic air, and the conglomeratic conclusion had been thus.)

“The US government, in foolishly allowing a breach of privacy of this caliber, has established for itself a base of lies and shame. All of it goes against ideals that are not limited *only* to digital peace and freedom. It is in our intentions of challenging you that we seek justice. End this now. All of it.”

He succeeded in the theatrics at least. The sun passed behind an errant cloud, and the glare on his glasses subsided so he could meet everyone in the eye. One guilty second passed, two, three, and then Chief Kirkland started laughing. It was totally villain-type laughter.

"Do you really believe you have even the grounds to 'challenge' us?" he pointed out. "Since you confessed, I'll give you this: I also admit that what we've been doing is immoral in a sense. But if we meet in court, everyone will know who *you* are and that what *you* all have been doing is so, *so* much worse."

A gust pooled over the still waters of the pond, carrying away the ducks with it. They were all alone on their tiny island; no visitors had dared approach. Ivan was filled with a spark of resistance. No one was going to make Eduard look weak if he could help it. He took a step forward and kept his response deathly quiet. "Is it?"

The FBI group didn't answer back until Alfred moved, giving a tired, pained groan. "Ivan. It is. It just is, okay? The whole reason this thing was started—the whole reason I did what I did—was to catch people like you," he altercated.

Ivan found he *hated* the when the wrong words came out of Alfred's mouth. "You say 'people like me?' People who cannot help it? Alfred, fighting for what is right is the right thing to do even if it gets you into trouble, and you know it. And maybe it is a radical statement."

Alfred nodded. "Because we're both radical people."

Ivan beamed the message back at him: "And we are both liars."

And for a heartbeat, they understood.

Ivan had been feeling rushes of boldness and bravado ever since he met Alfred, and he could tell how Alfred got them too. The exhaustion in Alfred's body language and the weary thoughts inside Ivan's own head spoke numbers about how really little throughout this whole thing they had been driven to care about concepts like "justice" and "morality." In another

world, this meeting might have put the cornerstone on their “rights,” but in this world there had been only their caution, and the wind to throw it to.

When it became apparent Ivan and Alfred were momentarily done hashing it out, the rest of their posses got up the nerve to speak again.

“So,” began one of the cops—one that Ivan had found out before was Alfred’s brother, interestingly. “If you don’t mind me asking...well, actually you shouldn’t mind, because I need to know. Where have you been hiding all this time? Mr. Vargas isn’t in Italy, and Felicks, correct me if I’m wrong...well, actually, don’t, because I’m pretty sure I’m right, but aren’t you supposed to live in Poland?”

“Yeah, I have been here for some time,” Felicks happily jeered.

“Not according to Toris,” scowled Kirkland.

Lovino Vargas said his first words yet (that weren’t whispered curses or hissed requests for certain people to shut up). “Tell me about it. Where were we? It was crazy crazy. We were fucking *everywhere* , day and night, and we were roommates.”

Alfred’s shoulders jerked. “Oh my god.”

“What?” asked Kirkland.

He bit his lip. “They were *roommates* .”

Ivan had the good human decency to smirk.

“But not you,” pointed out Héderváry, gesturing to Feliciano. “You lived separately. I will bet good money that you were just the cover. And Ludwig found that out last night, didn’t he, and that’s why he is all tied up.”

To the chagrin of his brother, Feliciano sheepishly nodded, and Ludwig nodded in sync. “But, you know, in the end, I had fun!”

Kirkland was seized with a shudder. “Heavens. What did we tell you, Agent Beilschmidt the Younger?”

“Oh, he cannot talk, hang on!” (Feliciano peeled back some of the tape; Ludwig cringed and grimaced.)

Ludwig cleared his throat. “You told me that getting too close and falling in love is against the rules and to be safe because he could be the Mafia.”

“And what happened?”

Ludwig hung his head like a kicked dog. “... *That* happened, and he was the Mafia.”

A light went on in the back of Ivan’s head. *I understand you* . This whole day was going to be full of understandings—he could just tell. As he thought it, Héderváry said it.

Over a quick puff of giggle: “It happened to all *three* of the agents. They *all* got too close and fell in love. How does that happen? It’s amazing! And also concerning.”

Ivan’s gaze drifted to meet Alfred’s eyes, or what he thought were Alfred’s eyes, because he still couldn’t see beyond the blackened sunglasses. *Did...you…?*

Alfred looked away.

Ivan clenched his hands in fists at his sides.

“And whatta we gonna do about *them?* ” asked another cop, one that Ivan recognized as well, because he was the cop that had arrested him. Carlos Machado. He was referring to the hostages. “Do you even want them back? Haven’t said anything…”

“Right. Yes.” Héderváry folded her hands and stared wistfully at the three agents. Heaved a sigh. “Oh, my division. What do we do with you.”

Eduard spoke up again. “They will only return on one condition: you promise to shut down *both* your FBI divisions for good, and ensure that nothing like this will ever happen again in the future. Effective immediately.”

There was much protest. Chief Kirkland’s face went red. “You don’t even know what you’re saying! Do you know how complicated that would be? These are our jobs. No-can-do!”

“Wait a sec, though.” Alfred put up a hand. “If you’re gonna make conditions like that, we have to get a part of the bargain, too.”

Ivan was already beginning to get another bad premonition, and the last time he had had this certain feeling, he had ended up locked in a cell. He met Alfred’s challenge anyway. “Like what.”

“You know.” He shuffled another step forward. “You shut down the circle. Give up hacking for good. Face it. Let go.”

Ivan didn’t say anything.

“That might be difficult also, won’t it,” peeped Raivis.

“These are our jobs, too,” said Eduard.

Felicks folded his arms and stuck out his hip so the rifle tilted. “Yeah, I am not liking it. I am used to my life. Say, like, *no* , Braginsky.”

Toris shifted. “There has to be a better compromise. At least, don’t say *yes* …”

Everyone turned to him.

Ivan breathed steadily. All of their arms were folded. He didn’t like that he had been accidentally placed as the decision-maker. He had never wanted any of this in the first place, but he *had* told them that only he was allowed to speak with Alfred. He sweated and swallowed.

Alfred was sizing him up, all bravado again, hiding. Old angry thoughts resurfaced to the top of Ivan’s mind, like how Alfred was to blame for all of this. The real criminal. Ivan knew that unless either of them stopped it, this battle would wage until they were both further drawn to places they did not want to be. Further separated, further punished. This truly might be the last time they were together.

And, he didn’t know if that was a thing he could possibly bear—

But.

Maybe staying far away from each other was a good thing, because every time they *were* together, something horrible happened as consequence.

Maybe Ivan needed to take heed. Let go. After all, he had been trying so hard before.

Maybe Ivan should have left Washington, D.C. a long time ago.

He thought of a response, but Alfred had read his mind and was already there, interrupting the awkward silence and clearing his throat and opening his big mouth to say the worst thing he had said all day.

Alfred took off his sunglasses. “Fine. Maybe if I can’t convince you, someone else can.” Pulled the walkie-talkie from his belt. “ *Bring them out.* ”

Horror struck Ivan in the gut and he reached for his scarf before he even knew what was happening, before Alfred looked off, over to the other side of the peaceful, algae-decorated pond. Before Kiku Honda, the museum worker, stepped out from behind a tree and beckoned for two figures to follow him. They were Ivan’s sisters, Natalya and Yekaterina.

He was frozen; his entire body was cold.

They were as peaceful as the pond, their white-blonde hair flowing in the breeze, their rompers fluttering, and they did not belong in this scene of lies and fighting. They were at least a hundred feet away, but it was like Ivan could read their expressions and hear them clearly. He hadn’t had a chance to communicate with them since the police department and since they had left that note in his dresser drawer. *We love you* .

But they were here—did they?

Yekaterina stepped gently into the pond as if an invisible force was pulling her to her brother. “Come home, Vanya. Just stop all of this and come home,” she said, sadness pooling in the words of the language they had spoken as children all the way across the world.

Natalya put her hand on her older sister’s shoulder and met Ivan with hard eyes. “We miss you. You should not have left.”

Ivan’s soul lurched. Plain as day, they were on Alfred’s side, and they had turned against him. They didn’t love him. Alfred didn’t love him. No one loved him. He didn’t even love himself.

He had been wrong. He shouldn't have even *come* to Washington, D.C.

He took a step back, bumping into the border of engraved stones. The attention of his family and his friends and his enemies were still on him, but he was far away, soaring up, over the trees, out of the park, past the silent glare of the Washington Monument, away and away. He was in outer space, in the universe, in the universe that had once belonged to Alfred and he but that was now dead and freezing, fading into fragments. He was nothing.

Three things happened at once.

The first: someone's phone began to ring, loud and unabashedly. It was so unexpected and inopportune that everyone jumped and began patting their pockets on instinct. No one found out whose it was, however.

The second: Gilbert Beilschmidt the Elder threw his hands into the air. One of his hands held a knife and a broken zip-tie and the other held the duct tape he had ripped off his mouth. He shouted, " *NOW!"* and he, along with two other freed FBI agents began to make a glorious break for it by jumping straight into the pond. As they swam for their lives, in the direction of Ivan's sisters on the other shore (who were quite taken aback by this turn of events and started to squeal discontentedly), Ludwig, the last one left, also freed but for some reason choosing not to follow, stood on the edge of the stones and exclaimed, "Seriously?"

The third: Ivan made eye contact with Alfred, turned in the opposite direction, looked up the footbridge into the city, and fled.

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Alfred went into panic mode. People started shouting, moving, and he could not push past them enough to see what was happening. His veins throbbed on overdrive, carrying nervous, frustrated hormones to his limbs, which subsequently were overwhelmed and began to go numb. He gasped; everything was too hot and too loud and too bright and too busy and his

head was heavy and his tongue was stiffening up so he couldn’t even call out for help or for backup or for anyone. He blinked five times.

Ivan.

Ivan was leaving.

Ivan should not be leaving. Ivan’s place was here. In his sight. With him. Anywhere else was wrong.

Alfred felt like he was going to pass out, so he started running.

To Ivan.

Chapter End Notes

showdown - britney

.

y'all

this is like 20 pages and 6,000+ words i sure damn hope it's worth all the damn time my damn life did NOT give me to work on it, frowny sad face times ten

BUT Y'ALL

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tears might have been streaming down Ivan's face, but he wouldn't be able to tell for a while. Trees and park and people flashed past him, interspersed with sparks of color from the city ahead and glares of sunbeams. He could hear nothing but the pounding of his pulse and the pitter of his steps against the path. He checked behind him to see if anyone was in pursuit and almost choked. The street was a few meters away; the van was gone.

Still not registering his actions, Ivan turned a full 360, checked twice, and stopped in front of his last hope.

Yao Wang was in for a surprise.

"Just *drive* ," Ivan demanded, entering the food truck before the man could even cuss him out.

"The hell?" Yao cried as Ivan fell against the interior side, heaving. "What—"

" *Please* ," Ivan begged, not wanting to check out the windows to see if he was close yet. In a display of desperation, he dug around and pulled out his wallet, offering the entire thing to Yao.

Yao stared at it for a second and then crossed his arms, his long ponytail flapping. "Why do you do this! Who even are you?"

Ivan shook his head. "No time. *No time!* "

A shout came from outside the truck, and both of them jumped. The dregs of fear were beginning to enter Yao's eyes as he glanced out the window and saw Ivan's chaser. An

intense scowl. “You are *crazy* is who you are!”

“I know,” Ivan moaned, holding on for dear life as Yao Wang snatched the wallet, fell into the driver’s seat, and blared the vehicle to life.

“You watch your ass. *I* better be a crazy rich Asian too when this is over due to all the shit I am put through, aru!”

Chinese rap filled the streets as the *Wok & Roll* truck gunned out of park. Ivan had been secured, but a box of fortune cookies on the counter hadn’t, and as they raced down Constitution Avenue the whole thing toppled over and turned its contents onto him.

Secret lives destroy lives .

Yes, now would definitely be a good time for a dramatic flashback, he concluded.

.

Alfred had not yet passed out, but he was close. As the food truck pulled away he bent over and put his hands on his knees—not because he was particularly out of shape, but because of the exertion of overwhelming frustration. Ivan, gone again. Lost!

You will receive help from an unexpected source.

“Get in!”

Alfred looked up, and it was Matt in the Ford. How Matt had possibly made it to their car on time and had navigated all the way over here, he didn't know, but he didn't care. Alfred didn't waste a breath and slammed into the passenger seat. " *Hola* !"

" *Bonjour* !"

" *Follow that car!"*

" *Affirmative!"* Matthew, a determined sheen on his face, put the pedal to the metal. The whole world seemed to be shaking—or maybe it was just them. Alfred snapped in his seat belt; he was no player.

Reflecting back on the meeting in the park, he couldn't pinpoint the exact moment when things had gone wrong. He knew he regretted a lot of the things he had said and hadn't said, but it was all too quickly becoming a blur. Ivan had seemed to mirror all the taxation he himself had felt; they were both slowly being crushed to death under all the pressure and they knew it. Maybe that's why they had reverted back to using memes and @ing each other. Forgetting for a second and relieving the stress had felt so good, and seeing Ivan's smirk and knowing it was his fault had certainly been better than seeing the ghost-white expression of fear Ivan had shown before dashing away, and knowing it was his fault.

"We can't tail him for too long. Not on these streets," Matt was saying. "I did tell the others to follow, but there's no telling how long it'll take them. Any idea where Ivan's headed?"

"Not at all," Alfred returned.

"And...why the *Wok & Roll* truck? You interviewed the guy who owns it, right? Are they working together?"

"I have even less of a clue on that one," he said. He tried to read Yao's expression through his rearview mirror up ahead, but the best view he got was of a long ponytail flying out the open window. He breathed carefully, fidgeted, and addressed his brother. "Wait—what if they are? Maybe we shouldn't follow them. I don't know if we should. It—it could be unsafe. What if it's another trap?"

“What do you mean ‘another?’” Matthew’s hands tightened on the wheel. “You can’t just let him get away. You saw him. He’s in flight response right now. Do you really think he would hurt you—oh, *fuck!* ” He slammed on the breaks.

Alfred, surprised even as he was jolted back in his seat, turned to look at him. “Matt!”

“What? Look!” He gestured ahead of both the vehicles. The ever-familiar cloud of annoyance enveloped them as they beheld a cluster of protesters right at the intersection of Constitution Avenue and 17th Street, blocking traffic.

Alfred nodded decisively. “Oh, fuck.”

A long sigh. “And let me guess. Is it…?”

“The whale people,” Alfred finished, because what else could be the answer.

The *Wok & Roll* truck, braked ahead of them, shuddered. Wang Yao honked his horn but only got a windshield full of MARINE FISHING IS MEAN FISHING in return.

“So maybe this isn’t a trap,” Alfred slowly said, mostly to himself. He tugged anxiously at his seat belt. “I don’t know, I don’t know! I don’t know what to do! Ivan is so—erratic, so unpredictable! You never know what’s going through his head!”

Matthew met his eyes. “You didn’t used to think that. By this point you know him pretty well and you know it.”

Alfred looked away, the pressure in his head bubbling up as he beheld what was happening on the street. The door to the food truck was swinging open, and there, less than twenty feet away, was Ivan, leaping out of it. His feet caught the pavement, his head caught a glimpse of

Alfred, his scarf caught the wind. He continued running away on foot, straight through the intersection up ahead.

Alfred was shaking and sweating buckets. He didn't move. "Matt."

"Al. What are you waiting for?" Matt unlocked the Ford's doors. "You loved him, didn't you?"

Alfred was surprised he still had the strength left to nod.

"Go."

And so he summoned everything else he still had left in him and went, not even bothering to close the car door in his wake. The hot Washington air whooshed around him and passed through him as he ran, following the gleam of the sun off Ivan's scarf. He zipped past *Wok & Roll* , into the street, into the crowd of protesters. It was there he almost lost sight of Ivan, weaving between high-strung throngs of people all shouting things at Alfred and flashing elbows that knocked into Alfred's sides. It took a lot of determination and a lot of "sorry" and "excuse me" and "out of my way" to get past. He broke into the center of the stopped square and scanned around for Ivan's height and white-blond hair, and there he was, continuing southeast, following a clear concrete path up a particular grassy hill.

Déjà vu ; he had been in this place before, but higher on the street, and he knew it was his time to go. Behind the trees and the sky Ivan's destination rose. Silent, stoic, mysterious. The Washington Monument. The place they had first met.

Alfred wasn't looking forward to the climb, but at least it was a wider terrain. If Ivan was aiming for the top of the hill, he really must not know what he was doing or where he was going; Alfred could feel the panic radiating off of him. Their combined intensities bounced between their bystanders, warding everyone to watch out. Some saw Ivan's expression and all but extended their arms, lost in the response to help him, and others saw Alfred's uniform and paused cautiously and obediently, pulling their children off his path. But Alfred couldn't focus on them. As they neared the top of the hill, closer to the foot of the obelisk, Ivan was beginning to slow, and he was beginning to catch up.

He wondered what images were flashing through Ivan's mind at the moment. Could it be images of themselves, sitting under shade, eating fortune cookies, ruminating over government conspiracies? Themselves, video chatting in the wee hours of the morning, laughing their heads off at the slightest funny something? Themselves, on their date, eating cold soup and soggy nachos, lying through their teeth? Themselves, at the police station, screaming at each other, hearts filled with distrust? Themselves, a city away, falling asleep to loneliness and tears? Themselves, texting up a storm? Themselves, just a few minutes ago, exchanging redundancies and pleasantries? Themselves, here, now, running after each other to nowhere?

Together.

Separate.

Together.

When they were close enough, and the flags circled around them as well, Alfred stopped, took his last deep breath, and shouted loud and clear for all to hear, "FBI! DON'T MOVE!"

Ivan, the energy zapped from him, came to a staggering halt. He gasped and gasped, turning around, his entire face red and tear-botched. He didn't move any more.

The world turned on its axis as they stared at each other, catching their breaths, crying. Somewhere was the drone of sirens. Somewhere was the rustling of wind through the trees. Somewhere there was a cold country, and somewhere there was a hot city. Here, it was utterly silent.

Time moved slowly, leisurely, allowing Alfred to wipe his own tears off his glasses with his thumbs and think of what he wanted to say. It was hard, thinking. Especially like this. He wanted to move again, to go up to Ivan, to use action and not words in this moment, but he knew he had to get something out first.

Ivan waited and watched him—not analyzing him or trying to read him, but just watching for once. It was peaceful, watching.

Finally, Alfred said it. He looked Ivan in his purpley, watery eyes and said it. “Everyone knows I loved you, but it’s not true. I did love you then, but I still do now. It never stopped. I love you and I am in love with you.”

Ivan’s eyes went wide and he let out another single fresh sob. Alfred was distressed at this but kept his vow to himself and didn’t move until Ivan whispered it back, softly and freely. “*Ya tozhe vlyublen v tebya.* ”

And it was like the rest of the world didn’t exist, or maybe this was the only world that did. “I’m sorry,” said Alfred, taking a tentative step closer. “For all of it.”

Ivan’s head bobbed as he respectfully nodded as well and took a closer step of his own. “*Pozhaluysta, izvini menya.* ”

“Is it okay if I hug you?” Alfred asked carefully, wanting comfort but not wanting to ruin this small, beautiful moment of theirs.

Ivan responded by taking another step forward and wrapping his arms around Alfred, burying his face in Alfred’s shoulder and crying some more. Alfred gently rubbed his back and pressed his cheek against Ivan’s scarf. It was just as soft as it looked, and Ivan’s smell was all over it.

They remained like that for an eternity, despite their fatigued bodies and the wet from sweat and tears. Alfred didn’t want it to end, and he wished that when Ivan had offered to come to his house in the middle of the night and hug him so long ago that he would have agreed.

After a little while, when both their eyes were dry, Ivan pulled slightly away, but only to ask in the sweetest, most attentive of voices, “Can I kiss you?”

Alfred responded by flicking off his glasses and meeting Ivan’s lips halfway.

It was amazing how just a small touch could incite such comfort and relaxation into a human being. Alfred had dreamed of this, he knew, as he ran the back of his hand along the delicate skin of Ivan's face. He smiled when their noses bumped and he tickled when hair brushed against his eyelashes. This kiss felt more climactic than the kisses on their first date, probably because it had been so long since, and the road leading to this had been messy and scattered. Alfred couldn't imagine going back. He held Ivan's face with both his hands and leaned in all the way until their hearts were touching as well, and he knew that this time, no one had lied.

Just as slow, careful, and hesitant as before, they parted. When Ivan looked at Alfred it was like he could see right into him, everything. Alfred felt suddenly funny, but, like, good-funny, and had the strangest urge… "Wow," he slipped out.

Ivan's cheeks were red no longer from the running, but from the blush. He laughed and it was marvelous and fantastic and something Alfred wanted to keep hearing forever.

The world around them certainly had stopped. The several visitors in the vicinity were frozen, in awe and confusion alike, until gradually someone started awkwardly clapping and it caught on, even as the sirens neared.

They pressed their foreheads together and Ivan mumbled, "I missed you. Very much."

"Me too," said Alfred. "I couldn't handle losing you."

Ivan's fingers lightly clenched ahold of Alfred's arms. "Do not let them break us apart again, please. I don't want to go back to them."

"Me neither," admitted Alfred, trying to soothe him. "We're staying with each other this time, no matter what happens."

No longer traitors. No longer enemies. No longer at war.

This was a new image, a new version of themselves, standing under the Washington Monument, holding each other, their emotions splattered far and wide enough to cover the whole city. Complete understanding. There was nothing between them in this moment. No screens, no bars.

Alfred felt something stirring inside of him that had been asleep for so, so long—the beginnings of trust.

Neither Alfred nor Ivan had bothered to look before, but trudging up the hill was an assortment of their comrades, minus Kiku and Ivan's sisters and the escaped hostage trio, wherever they were. Two police cars, two company FBI cars, one van-that-must-not-be-named, one Ford F-150 and one food truck sat on the street. Life was catching up with them.

And Ivan and Alfred, Alfred and Ivan, holding hands, turned to face it.

.

As promised, they didn't leave each other's sides, even when ushered into the back of one of the police cars. Ivan didn't look at his friends from the hacker group, and Alfred kept his head down as well as his boss took the driver's seat. Toris rode shotgun.

In the car, everyone took a deep breath. Kirkland, nearly all out of steam himself, laughed once before starting the engine. "Well, boys. Wasn't that an adventure."

Everyone exhaled.

"Where are we going now?" Ivan questioned.

“Back to the station,” came the answer. “Or perhaps to headquarters. Or perhaps...just...home. I honestly have no idea where we go from here.”

Alfred spoke up. “And you don’t just mean that about our physical destination.”

Kirkland smirked. “You’ve learned things. I’m not sure if I should be proud or scared.”

Alfred grinned, leaning back into his seat and squeezing Ivan’s hand, which let Ivan know then that they were safe. Unafraid, he rested his head on Alfred’s shoulder.

Toris was looking out the window. Quietly, he mentioned, “The rest of them are going now.”

The Chief turned the air conditioning on at full blast and handed him the AUX cord. “So shall we.”

And so.

They went.

Chapter End Notes

americano - gaga

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The clock on the wall told him it was a little past noon, yet he had no idea how long he had been sitting here. He couldn't remember if he had fallen asleep, and when he tried to think back, his mind returned only oblivion. He looked down at the cell phone in his hands and tapped it awake. The first page that came up showed him his messages. Out of pure instinct, he typed.

Alfred: hey

Send. A dotted bubble appeared beneath, and a few seconds later there were three responses waiting for him.

Ivan: hey

Ivan: how are you?

Ivan: how are you for real i mean. do not just say automatic that you are great like the americans do.

Alfred: haha um when you put it that way i don't know how to respond

Alfred: i'd say it's been pretty heckin rough, hbu?

Ivan: i am also not out here living my best life.

Alfred bit down on his lip and found that it had been trembling. “Coffee?” Matthew asked, appearing out of the fog and half-sitting down next to him on the bench.

“Nah,” Alfred responded, barely looking up.

Matt scooted a little closer, speaking softly, but loud enough that it blocked out the humming from the rest of the universe. “Can I get you *anything* ? Your fridge *is* fully stocked.”

Alfred shook his head. “Really, I’m good.”

They stayed like that for a few seconds, and then Matt sighed and gave in. “Okay. Call me if you need something, eh. I’ll just be over—”

“Thank you,” Alfred interrupted. It had been building in his throat for so long, and somehow he knew now was the time to say it. For some reason, he hadn’t given Matthew enough gratitude, he knew.

His brother’s eyes were tired, but never without compassion. He nodded slowly. “Of course.”

Someone else emerged from the shadows with an air of urgency. “They’re here, Chief. *Pronto* .” Then the man threw a disinterested look Alfred’s way. “He will be fine.”

Matt nodded. “All right, I’m coming.” He patted Alfred on the back. “You’ll be fine.”

Alfred nodded along, but a cloud was hovering over him and he was already sinking back into his messages.

.

The battery percentage on the little screen had read 92%, but Ivan found that he had been staring blankly at it for so long that it now said 89%. This gave him much discontent and he blinked rapidly. A new message appeared.

Alfred: i feel like i'm gonna explode

Ivan: i want to cry but i can't and i don't know why i want to cry or why i can't

Alfred: everytime someone talks i jump and it's hard to focus and exhausting trying to keep up and i can't think

Ivan: i do not know what is happening anymore and i am so sad i just want to sleep for two (2) years

He tried to close his eyes, but found he was somehow unable to, so he just leaned back against his seat—a cushioned bench—and breathed as slowly and as steadily as he could and tried not to tear up.

Alfred: i'm starving. like literally. i remember i checked my weight a couple days ago and holy smokes i might be like not fat soon i've lost so much from worrying and idk even why

Ivan: but you are not fat!!! i am the fat one

Alfred: omg ivan don't say thatttt you know who cares if we're fat like i'm fine with being fat screw the world

Ivan: still you should eat and not worry

Alfred: well in that case then you should sleep and not be sad

Ivan: ;(i guess you mean one is easy and the other is hard

He just wasn't sure which one was the easy one and which one was the hard one. Feeling a bit swampy, he typed with one hand and used the other to fan himself. There was a drone of fans from far above, but obviously they weren't doing their job. Ivan was so confused.

"Coffee?" Toris asked, suddenly in front of him, offering out a polystyrene cup. "We do have a Keurig."

"No thank you," Ivan mumbled back. "No Keurig for me. Sorry."

"Oh. Okay then." Toris continued to hold the cup away from his body, aware of the uselessness it now held. "I guess I should have asked before making this. Hm."

"Hm," Ivan echoed. "You should have asked."

Toris shifted. "Ivan...are you okay?" When Ivan didn't say anything, he said, "Um, I see you got your phone back."

"Yes," Ivan answered. "I am quite glad. You cannot do everything with a computer. Do you know if my phone is clean now?"

"Clean...from the FBI?"

"Yes."

Toris, a person seemingly incapable of casualness, shrugged. “I don’t know. I honestly have no idea what they did to it. I barely even hacked Felicks’s phone myself because we just FaceTimed so much anyway.”

Ivan sighed. “Okay.”

“Get well soon,” Toris murmured.

Ivan nodded. “Bye-bye.”

Ivan: what i really want to do is run away and never have to talk to anyone else ever again.

Alfred: i hear Alaska’s nice this time of year

Ivan: haha that might be the closest our two countries ever get. i miss Russia a lot.

Alfred: ;(

Ivan: ;(

Alfred: i would if u would tho

Voices echoed from somewhere; Ivan ignored them.

Ivan: i would

Alfred: i bet you would make an excellent humble fisherman

Ivan: is a fisherman cute

Alfred: ...you could make anything cute

Ivan: okay then correct answer (*⌒∇⌒*)

Alfred: PFF

Ivan: what would you be

Alfred: idk like a mountain climber? a glacier climber? a bear-wrangler probably

Alfred: whatever's cool ig

Ivan: hmm

Ivan: what about a stargazer

Alfred: ohhhhh!!!!!

Ivan: i bet the stars are really clear in alaska. not like here where everything is concrete and the river smells bad. i want to be a stargazer

Alfred: YESsss i stan the stars

Ivan: like NASA?

Alfred: yeah

Ivan: yeah.

Alfred: we would live in a little wooden house on top of a glacier and out back we could have a giant telescope

Ivan: i love that

Ivan: we could go outside at night with blankets and warm drinks and map our own constellations

Alfred: ;)

Alfred: do u think we would need computers

Ivan: for stargazing?

Alfred: just to have

Ivan: no. no computers. i never want to touch one ever again.

Alfred: same. i thought about this before but i've changed my mind. technology sucks.

Ivan: what about cell phones?

Alfred: we could rig up a landline like old people

Ivan: what if you fell down the glacier and you have to call for help?

Alfred: put another landline at the bottom

Ivan: (^_-)

Alfred: and if the government tracks us down we can communicate with our own code language that's a cross between english and russian

Ivan: rusglish

Ivan: wait ew that is bad

Ivan: englian?

Ivan: no i do not like it

Alfred: anglo-russo

Ivan: russo-anglo

Ivan: can i ask a question? i learned english in school but how did you learn russian?

Alfred: eh i took a couple college courses and basically was a slave to the duolingo owl

Alfred: and, uh, if i'm gonna be honest here, listening to you over the phone helped

He read over these words twice, and for the first time in many long minutes, shifted. But revulsion no longer stirred in his stomach; his heart just felt a little bit heavier.

Ivan: i like when you are honest.

The distant voices' volume lifted for a few moments, but still Ivan did not look up.

Alfred: can i ask something?

Ivan: yes

Alfred: did you hack into my phone recently? it was acting weird

Again, he stirred, but kept an intense focus on his cell phone, even as outside sounds reverbated from far off. He stuck his chin in his scarf and typed.

Ivan: yes. just last night and this morning. i am very sorry. I was mad and I should not have done it.

Alfred: thanks for telling me. i'm sorry too. i was a shitty mr. fbi.

Ivan: i was a shitty hacker.

Alfred: we're all shitty yay

Ivan: (⌣_⌣")

Alfred: can i ask another question? it might be a personal one. it is about why you wear your scarf all the time.

Coldness crept back over him, and Ivan shivered. Certainly if Alfred had seen him use his phone at night, Alfred would have seen him without his scarf on, which meant Alfred would have seen the bandages around Ivan's neck. Ivan didn't have friends, but he *had* had workmates and acquaintances, and even they had asked questions. It was considerate of Alfred to wait this long to ask him. Actually, it was very considerate.

Ivan began typing, and then...stopped.

He couldn't. Not right now when they were making linguistics jokes and bringing up the Mr. FBI meme again.

The cold lifted off of Ivan's skin, evaporated through his clothes, and dissipated away, the last remnants of a winter's wind.

Not right now when they were happy together.

Ivan: I am sorry. I am not ready. I will tell you another time.

Alfred: It's okay ;)

Someone marched by him, and this time, Ivan brought his head up. It was Chief Arthur Kirkland. He gave Ivan a sideways look for a second but did not stop for chit-chat. He turned into one of the rows of cubicles that Ivan somehow hadn't noticed before. More voices. Ivan began to feel swampier and swampier.

Ivan: by the way. where are u?

Alfred: ...

Alfred: oh shoot um

Alfred: ??? god where am i

Alfred: OPE sorry lol i just had a brain fart that was weird anyway i'm at the fbi

Alfred: now that u mention it where are u

Ivan shook his head to clear it, and shook it one more time just to be certain.

Ivan: yes that is where i am too

Alfred: oh sweet where

Ivan: idk on a bench

Alfred: omg wait that's where i am

Ivan looked down the length of the short bench, which was bordered by artificial walls. No Alfred. When he peeked beyond the wall he could see what looked like the staff kitchen. The Keurig was there, but no Alfred.

Ivan: you must be on a different bench because i don't see you.

Alfred: yeah there are more than one bench i remember

Alfred: i think

Ivan: u think??

*Alfred: shit man i gotta be honest i don't even do drugs or alcohol but i still feel hungover and high as a kite what the h*ck is going on*

Ivan: i can't remember how i got here

Alfred: me neither

Ivan: i am going to stand up now

He stood up. It was a bad idea. His body started shaking out of his control, so he immediately sat back down.

Ivan: never mind

Alfred: oof i fell over

Ivan: are you okay?

Alfred: yeah

Ivan: why did you text then just get up!

Alfred: yeah lol i'm dumb

Ivan: i have been here before. um, illegally. this is very far underground. how do you get cell service down here?

Alfred: pff idk government secrets ig

Ivan: what is the last thing you remember?

Alfred: hhhhhnnnn uh

Alfred: kissing you

Ivan: i remember that too!

Alfred: oh thank god i was scared for a sec it didn't happen

Ivan: <333

Ivan had instant regrets after sending just the little hearts, and began to type again to say anything else—to really try to put the spectacular feeling he had had on top of that hill into words.

Ivan: i would have a deeply sad and empty life if it did not happen

Alfred: i can't imagine any other life

He immediately blushed and buried his chin back into his scarf, smiling to himself.

Ivan: that was so nice. you are a closeted romantic

Alfred: omg no stop you're so nice

Ivan: you would make a very cute stargazer and bear-wrangler in Alaska

Alfred: sign me up

Alfred: if only that were my job now lol i'm gonna be fired

Ivan: i saw your boss walk past me a few minutes ago

Alfred: oh man what'd he say

Ivan: nothing

Alfred: cryptic. well he is a "orders a single black coffee to go" kind of guy

Ivan: omg

Ivan: Toris was here too and he actually offered me coffee

Alfred: wait Matt was here and he did the same

Ivan checked his phone battery again; it read 85%.

Ivan: this is still weird. i can remember everything else clearly now except for how i got here or what is happening.

Alfred: hmm

Ivan: it is almost like my memory was wiped.

The hum of the cosmic microwave background radiation got just a bit louder.

Alfred: HOLY

Alfred: oh my god they wouldn't have

Ivan: what?!

Alfred: Hedervary. whenever you get checked in to come into headquarters, there's the optional memory wipe taser thing

Ivan: what?!?!?

Alfred: ¯_(ツ)_/¯

Ivan: but i still remember everything important...why would they want to do that to us??

Alfred: i don't even.

Alfred: i mean sometimes she does it just for fun cuz ya know

Ivan: ;0

Ivan: maybe they wanted us to forget so we could be easier to manage. Like temporary vegetables. they could be having a meeting without us right now. are you hearing voices too??

Alfred: "temporary vegetables" ugh what do they even think, like we're detrimental to them or something

Ivan: ...

Ivan: well. it is probably true.

Alfred: oof.

Ivan: oof indeed.

As his head cleared, he began to feel more restless. Suddenly, that vision of Alaska seemed more and more appealing. He and Alfred could still leave, potentially, if they wanted. They could sneak out somehow and never come back. Ivan had said he would, but he wanted to see Alfred first.

Ivan: do you think we should try to do something

Alfred: i might be able to walk now...okay make a loud noise and i'll track you

Ivan: ...can you make the loud noise

Alfred: yeah!

Ivan waited a few seconds, and then from somewhere nearby Alfred yelled, "HELLO? ANYBODY HOME?"

Ivan smiled again. He stood up, and this time, his body agreed with him. He slowly rounded the corner of the bench and turned into the kitchen area, re-exploring a place he had already infiltrated. It was pretty much silent except for the far-off obscure utterances. He reached the opposite wall and peeked his head around it, and there was Alfred, grinning. But next to him stood the familiar female FBI Chief Ivan recognized as Elizabeta Héderváry.

"I am home," Ivan said meekly, pocketing his phone. Would she try to take it from him again? Yet—how had it gotten to his hands in the first place?

"Hello," the Chief said cordially. "Are you two feeling any better?"

"Yes," they said in an irked unison.

Her cheeks reddened and she nodded. "Well. Glad to hear. Would you care to join the rest of us? We are just putting the finishing touches on negotiations."

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Alfred threw Ivan a look and then crossed his arms. “And who negotiated the idea of *mind-wiping* us?”

Héderváry tilted her chin at him, but looked smug. “Oh, please. Like it is the first time. It was my idea, actually; I thought that with everything that had been happening, the two of you deserved a break. Well—rather—we needed a break from *you* . Just some time to try to sort things out on our own. Too much bias.” She shrugged. “Only an hour has passed. My apologies.”

Alfred scoffed, but he wasn’t actually angry. He was relieved, actually, that he had been left out, which said a lot about how much his life had changed. And to have been given a moment of peace, albeit stunted… Ivan just folded his hands. “My understanding was that Alfred and I were not the only ones who are *biased.* ”

She nodded solemnly. “Like I said, there were a lot of things to sort out. But we have finally come to what we think could be a conclusion, and it is time for *everyone* to hear it.”

“Wait, *everyone* ?” Alfred asked. There were certainly a lot of peoples involved.

Even so, Elizabeta nodded. “Your brother has been working hard” — she turned to Ivan— “and your sisters have been anxiously waiting to talk to you.”

Ivan’s eyes lit up, first in excitement, and then in apprehension. Alfred stepped a little closer to him for comfort.

Ivan brushed Alfred’s arm as he faced him. They had another silent, personal exchange, but this time they did not have to use their cell phones.

Ivan: i will if you will

Alfred: i will

The starry sky hung far above them, each twinkling dot millions of light years away, but connected all the same. Chief Héderváry gestured to the back of the office, to the top-secret meeting rooms. “So, will you come with us and finish this once and for all?”

Chapter End Notes

satellites - beyoncé

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Y'all, my life has been sooo busy. SOO busy. I read what you say for the support and guidance to keep going. Have no fear, for I am still here! <3 three chapters left. happy spooktober!!

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“ *Vanya,* ” Natalya whispered, distant at first, but coming closer. He stood shock still as she ran to him, Yekaterina on her heels.

He wasn’t sure what he expected. They were hundreds of meters underground, locked away from the rest of the world, yet not in complete privacy. Tears were streaming down her face. Her arms had been open, as if she wanted to hug him, but she seemed to have second thoughts; she fell to a stop in front of him and just pleaded with her eyes like she was restraining herself. Katya stopped, too, and soon all three of them were just standing there, doing nothing but crying.

“Oh, Ivan,” Katya sobbed, tears staining her rumpled romper.

“I’m sorry,” he choked out, because it was all he had left to say to them. They had spent money to come here for him, they had missed spending time with him because he was with Alfred, they had nearly been arrested because of him, and yet they had supported him *still* at the station and with the computer, even when they didn’t understand a thing. Ivan wondered how tight he had stretched their loyalty and their love. “I’m so sorry. I’m a horrible person—it’s all true!” He didn’t deserve to be in their presence, much less to receive hugs from them.

They hugged him anyway. Natalya pressed kisses to his cheeks as Yekaterina sobbed into his scarf—the very scarf she had knitted herself all those years ago. Ivan was extraordinarily careful with embracing them, still feeling like he was unworthy.

But he got what was coming to him. A few seconds later, Natalya reeled back and slapped the cheek she had just kissed, and then kissed it again. Ivan was so surprised he laughed, and then bit his tongue.

“ *Talk* to us!” Katya begged, clinging to him. “I will *not* let my little brother call himself a horrible person before I’ve heard the end of it!”

“No more running away!” Natalya agreed, seizing his hand. “I want to know *everything* !”

And so Ivan obliged. He sat down with them on the rock-solid carpeting of the FBI office space and spilled all the tea, even explaining the hacker parts and the Alfred parts he had been nervous about admitting before. They were not startled. It didn’t take long, for they knew (or had completed the puzzle themselves) about most of the story already.

“So you do love him,” Natalya said solemnly, closing her eyes. She put one hand to her face. When she spoke again her voice was very quiet. “Do you still...love... *us?* ”

“Of course,” Ivan cried. “Of course, of course, of course!” He took a deep breath. “That has never stopped. That *will* never stop.”

Twin tears traced over Natalya’s cheeks. “I hid the computer for you. I wasn’t sure when you would come back. I just remembered seeing it when you were in the bathroom that one time and—” Her voice broke. “I didn’t know. I’m sorry. I just knew it was important to you. Did you—did you find it?”

Ivan nodded. He wasn’t sure he should be thanking her, but he did so anyway. He didn’t care what was illicit anymore.

They sniffled in silence for a little longer until they were interrupted. Alfred stepped around the corner, straightening up when he spoke. “Hey, um. They’re ready now. Sorry if…? Um, I mean.” He cleared his throat awkwardly and tried to smile as everyone stared at him. “They’re ready for us to come in.”

“Yes,” Ivan told him, standing up. Katya grabbed onto his arm.

“Wait. Ivan. Whatever they tell you to do in there…they can’t make you stay here, right? They can’t take you away again.” She looked on the brink of desperation. “They told us you would have to listen to them, but—but—”

“Who cares about what they say?” Ivan took off his scarf and wrapped it around Yekaterina’s shoulders. His neck was left exposed, but he found that he wasn’t self-conscious about it. “I will listen to *you* .”

And with that, they followed Alfred into what was about to be the second-most dramatic meeting of their lives.

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Chief Arthur Kirkland was worse for wear, on the edge of sanity, frayed on all ends, but remarkably pulling through. “We have somewhat come to a conclusion. A compromise,” he began to inform the newcomers. “And nobody’s going to like it.”

Everyone was gathered in a loose circle around a central conference table—and it really was *everyone* . Some sat in spare chairs, the Mafia brothers were sitting on the floor, Yao Wang (who had voiced that he “refused to sit with the rest of you heathens”) leaned against the wall, and Felicks sat in Toris’s lap. Alfred waved hello and swung up onto the table itself, criss-cross-applesauce. Ivan opted to stand. There were vague grumbles all around, except for Gilbert, who was squished between Francis and Antonio on a bench that had been dragged in. He stretched his arms out in a yawning fashion and rested them over the shoulders of his benchmates, who weren’t fazed in the slightest. “Now, when you say ‘nobody…’”

Chief Elizabeta Héderváry pointed a stringent finger at him from across the room and he immediately closed his mouth and adjusted his posture. “It is the only way.”

“Scary!” voiced Feliciano Vargas excitedly, rubbing his hands together.

“But will it, like, *benefit* all of us?” Alfred asked, almost raising his hand. It didn’t seem thinkable that a conglomeration of opposing factions who had been hunting each other for months could come to a one single agreement, but already here they were, sitting in this room together without dissolving into chaos (yet), so that had to count for something.

“Well, in a particularly aggravating sense, yes,” answered Kirkland. “But *only* if everyone agrees.”

“Let’s hear it, then,” Alfred declared, drumming his fingers against the tabletop in anticipation.

Matthew stepped forward. “Ahem. First of all, the things said in here don’t leave this room, or we forfeit everything we’ve worked to. If even one person on the outside found out about this, we would *all* go to prison for the rest of our lives. Eh...myself included.” A slight sheepishness. “Is this understood?”

Whoa. Alfred glanced around the meeting room, and everyone seemed to be paying more intense attention. Slowly (and after some scoffs and nervous laughter), people began to nod along to the terms. Alfred glanced at Ivan behind him, and they nodded together, then faced the front again.

“Good,” remarked Arthur. “So, the conclusion is as follows: we do absolutely nothing.”

He paused here for dramatic effect, and it worked. Everyone froze, on the edges of their seats, eyebrows raised, waiting for him to explain the impossibility that had just come out of his mouth.

“Is my English not working again? Did I understand you wrong?” Yekaterina asked softly.

“It is a similar compromise to what we discussed in the park, except all parties are giving up their jobs,” Kirkland continued. “If the FBI ceases all scrutinous operations and the hackers quit hacking, and the rest of you conveniently forget about ever participating in the events of the last few weeks, we could almost avoid scandal entirely. But all of us must agree.”

“Damn government secrets,” mumbled Ludwig.

“I’ve decided that I like it,” Toris put in. Alfred did a double-take, for he actually sounded cheery.

“But I still want my job!” Felicks complained. “And, like, what is stopping me from agreeing to this now but then totally continuing exactly what I do later?”

“The retribution of us revealing who you are and what you’ve done,” promptly answered Elizabeta. “And if you try to retaliate and reveal *us* , we all spend the rest of our lives behind bars.” She shifted her weight, tilting her head, pensive. “There’s got to be something else you can do. Makeup tutorials, perhaps?”

“Cliché,” he spat. “No one would watch me.”

“Oh, I would,” Toris assured.

The building above them hummed in consideration.

“It is almost exactly like in the park,” said Ivan thoughtfully, back to addressing Chief Kirkland. “But you said it is ‘complicated?’ Have you changed your mind?”

Arthur nodded and cleared his throat. “Let’s just say I’ve been thinking. It might not be as complicated as I had initially claimed. Most other divisions of the FBI don’t know we exist just as we don’t know about them, and if we just did nothing—silently ceased reporting, akin to what Toris and Alfred did when reporting themselves—we could perhaps escape unnoticed for at least long enough for me to conveniently lay everyone off and then flee the country.”

“Holy guacamole,” Alfred laughed out, sitting forward. “Wait, are you *serious?* ” He looked at Héderváry for confirmation, incredulous.

“To the syllable,” Kirkland responded. “Ever since I started getting these blasted gray hairs I’ve been questioning my place here, but my incompetence came with a price, I guess.” For a moment he looked sad, and then he shrugged. “I did consider faking my death.”

“Oh, but that is just *too* dramatic,” crooned Francis Bonnefoy.

“You were tied up for weeks and you smelled like absolute rubbish, mind you. Bugger off.”

Alfred half-turned to Ivan. “And here *we* were the ones joking around about running away!”

Ivan smiled bashfully. “I guess it be like that sometimes.”

Elizabeta sighed and rolled her eyes. “As for me, I have not yet decided what I will do. I am toying with the idea of just reporting all the missing agents as dead and finally declaring the case closed.”

Lovino snorted. “Oh, *please* do.”

“But then what will *we* do?” Feliciano beseeched. “We cannot just go back to the Mafia and tell them the mission is failure, right?”

Antonio scratched his newly-shaved stubble. “Well...who said you had to go back at all?”

Both Italian brothers fell into a stupefied, curious silence, until Lovino began to shake his head. “I *cannot* believe I am here to witness it. The very first time you said something that was not dumb! I thought it would never happen!”

Eduard, hacker extraordinaire, previously silent and composed, burst into a frenzy of laughter. The room quieted as he awkwardly caught his breath, taking off his glasses to wipe away a stray tear. “I am sorry! It is just all this talk—we all truly *are* criminals!”

“Not *me* ,” scoffed Yao Wang. “I have done *nothing* wrong.”

They all looked at him.

Ivan opened his mouth. “Um—”

“Shut! *One* time!” He crossed his arms grumpily. “For so much trouble, I think I deserve...how you say it in English money words... *compensation* .”

Everyone winced. “We were kinda hoping you wouldn’t ask that,” Arthur mumbled.

Yao smirked. “Oh, no, that is right, stupid. I gone through *hell* . Let’s give me this bread.”

Kirkland put a hand to his temple. “All due respect, sir, but, see, being we’re practically liquidated, we don’t really have the funds to do that…”

The food truck owner put it bluntly. “I will tell.”

Everyone immediately began patting their pockets.

Raivis leaned over to Eduard. “Don’t we have all that bitcoin and bribe money saved up?”

Eduard nodded slowly. “I guess...if we are agreeing to this plan...and if the FBI are giving up their assets, it would only be fair of us to do the same.”

It was obvious he was hesitating. Alfred glanced back once more at Ivan, who was wincing in harmony. It would be hard. When they walked out of this room, they would be changed people, careerless and lost.

Carlos Machado seemed to be thinking along the same lines. He took a good long drag from his ever-present cigar and shook his head. When the smoke dissipated, he looked tiredly at Matt. “This is so damn shady, man. Are there cameras in here? If we get caught...”

But Matthew, of course, wouldn’t lose his job. “It’s what we have to do to help the most people,” he answered without a beat. “You know this is the right thing, and we have to do the right thing.”

“What will you do with all the evidence you’ve collected?” Alfred asked. “You have testimonies from them, right” —he pointed at Ivan and his sisters— “and recordings and tapes and stuff?”

“Well, working with the FBI, we are used to keeping things secret. We’ll probably do what Chief Héderváry suggested,” his brother replied. “Close the case and lock it all away.”

Ludwig perked up. “The evidence and interview with Feliciano, too?” he inquired, glancing between Matthew and Elizabeta. “Then what about the witness whose testimony we used? The one that offered the description? Don’t they know about all that happened?”

Kiku Honda cleared his throat. Alfred had almost forgotten his friend was even present in the room. “For this, I have an answer,” he said. “Because actually, I was the witness.”

Alfred nearly fell off the table. “ *What* ?” He scratched his brain to remember the events of weeks ago that he had barely paid attention to even when they had been happening. “ *What* witness? You didn’t tell me this!”

Kiku blushed and folded his hands. “I was on my way to work very early in the morning when I thought I saw Mr. Bonnefoy being, erm, abducted by the Mafia. It was a Tuesday, I think, and at first I did not think much of it until a few days later.” His eyes flicked to Ivan for a moment. “The day I saw you sneak into the museum. Alfred, I called you that night, and when we were talking about your work and everything happening, I started to remember how strange it was. So right after, I called the police. They kept my name anonymous. I did not tell you even later because you started to act strange, as well, and Mr. Kirkland contacted me, and, erm, I did not know who to trust.”

Alfred wanted to be mad or even hurt, but instead he could only follow suit of the others and laugh in disbelief. “Well, dude, I’m so glad this is all over now. That’s just showbiz I guess.”

“I’m sorry for being a doubtful friend,” Kiku admitted quietly. “We can play games, maybe? Make it up?”

“Oh, we’d *better* ,” Alfred promised. He scolded himself internally for not walking into this meeting already expecting some new plot twist and/or secret to be divulged.

“Right.” Arthur whipped out a pen and clicked it. “So, back to the matter at hand. I want to decide this now before I realize I’ve made an utter fool of myself and I change my mind. Does everyone agree to the terms?”

Alfred caught motion out of the corner of his eye as Ivan exchanged glances with Natalya and Yekaterina. None of them seemed tentative on the matter, however, as Ivan’s answer came right away: “Yes. I swear I will never hack again.”

“Wait, I just—” Eduard was shifting around nervously. “I support the compromise. But it will take a while to cut my connections with the...um...the underground. And I do not really knowing what...what to do...after. I will have to start over completely.” He blinked, looking around. “All of us will, right?”

“It’s only fair we all do,” Kirkland responded sincerely.

“Not me,” Yao Wang grumbled again to himself. This time no one paid him any heed.

“But it will be better than before with no more spying,” Toris concluded. “The circle does not end until you sever it.” He put his hand over Felicks’s. “The world will be a better place.”

“Oh, whatever,” Felicks scoffed. “Fine.”

“I consent to the terms,” consented Ludwig. “Even if it means I lose my job.”

“Me too,” Feliciano hurried out.

“ *Fu* —ah.” Lovino crossed his arms. “Fine; I also consent.”

Alfred waited as, slowly, everyone around the room said they agreed. Their faces became blank as their mouths closed, as if the gravity of the situation was pushing harder against them, one by one. When it was Alfred’s turn to say the words, he tried to put as little thought into them as possible until he realized that doing that—blocking worries out of his mind—wouldn’t help him face his new future. If he had the courage to meet paranoia in the eyes, then perhaps he had the courage to stand up to it, as well. “I agree.”

“Jolly good.” Chief Kirkland stood up, adjusting his suit jacket. The expression on his face looked anything but jolly good; he looked as if he had just finished thwarting a demonic possession. Alfred felt like he should be concerned. “I suppose we should whip out a contract or something to sign, if the looming threat of a life sentence or worse isn’t enough.”

“What…” All heads in the room turned to Natalya, who held quite a grim determination herself. She straightened her shoulders and faced them with a businesswoman’s inquiry. “What if...what if later, none of us are betraying, but the world still finds out.”

“Well, then, miss, is when we start praying,” Arthur declared. He moved to shuffle paper out of his workbag.

Alfred, not too keen with that cynicism, swirled around to face her. He had a better idea. “Then we face them together. All of us. How about that? Think the likes of us could take on the world?”

“I think we could.” Ivan smiled, reaching down to hold his younger sister’s hand.

She blinked down to her feet, her cheeks taking on a cute pink hue. “Fine by me,” was all she said.

After the meeting was adjourned and the contract signed and sealed away, the hackers and agents and everyone in-between congregated in the kitchen. Ivan stood with his sisters by the refrigerator; Alfred found himself snagged away by a certain newfound gray division employee.

“Hey, kid, it’s been a while,” Gilbert growled out, ruffling his hair. “Damn, so much has changed. Did you keep the place interesting without me? Sure looks like it.” A playful taunt in his eyebrows. Alfred was much taken-aback.

“Oh, bet,” he retorted. “Glad to see *you* survived your...torture or whatever. How does it feel, being a liberated dead man?”

That ever-present grin Alfred had always respected and tried to mimic himself. “Me, I feel awesome! Free as a bird! How are *you* holding up?”

Alfred grinned back, then let it die. He remembered how Ivan had told him not to give a basic answer. “Yeah, uh, life sucks, but we’re getting there.”

Gilbert cocked his head, his reddish eyes strangely analytic. Then he put a hand on Alfred’s shoulder and turned off to look at Kirkland, who was conversing with Héderváry on the other side of the room. “You ruined a perfectly good kid!” he hollered somewhat jokingly. “Look what you did! He’s got anxiety!”

Alfred laughed good-naturedly as Arthur rolled his eyes in one of his *We’ll talk later* looks. “We’ve all gone a little crazy.”

“Legit.” Gilbert threw a nod at his brother Ludwig, who was having his coffee dressed by Feliciano near the Keurig. “I still do not understand what happened here. True love saved everyone or something?”

Alfred watched as Ludwig accepted the coffee, his eyes meeting Feliciano's over the rim of the mug. He realized it was the first time he was seeing Ludwig look happy, even mildly so. He supposed Ludwig was free now, as well. "Well...kind of the opposite, actually," Alfred surmised. "True love pretty much ruined everything. But it's chill now." He allowed himself to chuckle again and couldn't help but think of Ivan. He hadn't talked to Ivan at the meeting much, had he? Where was Ivan—still by the fridge. Alfred felt the urge to go over and stand by him soon.

"Hell yeah 'it's chill.' We have no jobs now!" Gilbert said this with a flash of amusement in his eyes, as if he wasn't at all concerned. "Which means no more Friday night bowling, which means I am not sad."

Alfred tried to think all the way back to that fateful night. "Eh, didn't you get your arm stuck in the—"

" *Ja* , as a matter of fact, I *did* ." Gilbert crossed his arms protectively, like the experience was the one thing he used to keep his grip on sanity during the dark times.

"Right."

"And I am not ashamed," he scoffed, puffing his chest out. "I'm proud. It has made me strong. I can survive anything, you know."

"Right." Alfred wasn't sure if he was allowed to laugh again.

Gilbert gave him a chummy punch on the shoulder. "See you around, kid. Don't get too wild."

Alfred saluted as he strutted off to harass someone else. Then he turned around to search for Ivan, but found someone else blocking his path.

“Agent Alfred F. Jones.” Arthur Kirkland put his hands on his hips, assessing Alfred with a sigh—a contented sigh for once. “I must say. It is an honor to fire you.”

Alfred let out a breath of air as well. In mock surprise, he said, “Chief. I have no words.”

“My only regret is that it had to happen this way,” Arthur continued, cringing a little. Was he actually getting emotional? Wait, Alfred wasn’t prepared for this.

He tried to stand a little straighter. “Wow, I mean, I’m super sorry too. You’re like, um, a dad to me.” He flinched. “Whoa, I did *not* mean to say that. I mean, no, I mean I *did* ... Like, the nice intention, but maybe not that exact phrasing. Awkward. Um. Yeah. I’m super sorry.”

Kirkland nodded, closing his eyes for a somber two seconds. “I meant I wish I would have fired you the moment you walked in on your first day instead of having to deal with this whole mess of right now, but here we are.”

Alfred began to nod along and then halted. “Hey! That’s not...are you *blaming* me?”

“I am not.”

“You totally are.”

“I promise you that I am not.” The Chief gave the tiniest of smirks. “Only I will deign to assume the fault for not firing you when I should have.”

Alfred spread out his hands. “Oh, come on! What about Toris?”

They both zeroed-in on Toris, who was sitting over in the cushioned chairs, conversing with Eduard and Raivis. He made eye contact with them. They squinted disapprovingly. He gave them a little wave and turned back to his friends.

“Toris kind of fired himself, didn’t he?” Arthur supposed, scratching at his collar.

Alfred rolled his eyes. “Whatever. So are you really gonna ‘flee the country?’ That’s pretty BA.”

“I think…” And then he actually looked a bit wary, the frazzledness from the beginning of the meeting settling back over him, but he gulped through it. “Contemplating all this general corruption has made me realize that you’ve taught me things, too. I think I want to enjoy a peaceful life free from secrets and rules for a while. Although, I do have a multitude of connections in the MI5…” He cleared his throat. “You didn’t hear that. But yes. I think escape would be my best option.”

Alfred blinked in wonder. “You know, this does feel like I’m losing a parent.”

Kirkland laughed. “ *Please* . Do take care of yourself when I’m gone, okay? Or at least get Braginsky to do it for you. He seems…” —a steady inhale— “capable.”

Alfred smiled. “That’s for sure.” He stared at his boss, at one of the strongest men he knew, who just a week ago had been yelling at him in a police station, and even further back than that had given him the whole assignment of watching Ivan in the first place. He had first thought of Arthur as an overbearing sort of misanthrope, but was struggling with accepting the fact that he was going to miss him as a firm force in his life. “Will we ever see each other again?” he blurted out.

“If the fates align,” Kirkland responded, hesitantly. He looked like he was in the middle of having revelations as well. “And I did mean what I said about it being an honor. You’re a very clever young man, Alfred. Don’t waste what you have.”

“I won’t,” he promised, saluting. “Do you want me to leave my badge and gun on your desk?”

Arthur groaned. “You don’t have a gun, Jones, and let’s all thank God for that. But yes, go be useful and turn in all your things. I’m going to put the kettle on and make goodbye scones.”

“Weird flex but okay,” Alfred noted. “ *Adios!* ”

The moment the Chief walked away, Alfred felt a presence behind him. He jumped when Ivan cheerfully said, “Did I smell a meme?”

Alfred promptly swiveled. “Hey! I was just looking to talk to you! What’s up?”

Ivan still wasn’t wearing his scarf, which Alfred had noticed earlier but hadn’t commented about. He didn’t look insecure about it, however. His eyes were shining with a merry brightness and he held himself with confidence. Alfred was still jealous of his height. “I want to talk to you, too. How do you feel about losing your job?”

Alfred shrugged. “The shock hasn’t set in yet? I don’t know. I’m not worried, which is good. Really good. How do you feel?”

“I am not sad,” Ivan declared with a cute little smile. “And I think I am fired from my other job, too, for never showing up. But it is okay. I can find somewhere else to garden.”

It seemed so long ago that Ivan had been wearing overalls and yellow gloves. The thought reminded Alfred of something. “Your sunflower. In your apartment.”

“Oh, I snuck in and watered it,” said Ivan, blushing. “I think it will be fine.”

“...Ah.” Alfred looked at him, just looked at him, wondering how one person could turn out to be so many things. “I watered it too.”

“Thank you,” Ivan breathed. “W-Would you like to have it? Because...well, my sisters and I were talking and...I need to tell you something.”

Somehow, Alfred already knew what was coming. A solemn weight settled in him, but he was ready to accept it. He was just reaching out to take Ivan's hand when yet another interruption besieged them.

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"Well, friends?" Eduard stepped forward, putting his hands together. "The circle is officially disbanded."

A weak, halfhearted cheer went up over the circle's past members, who had gathered around him. "It is my pleasure to working with you," Eduard continued. "All of you." He gave Ivan a respectful nod.

"I guess this is goodbye to them," Ivan said, partially to himself, partially to Alfred. A cloud of guilt enveloped him. When all was said and done, he hadn't disliked the group of illegals. Maybe if he hadn't been so distressed during his time with them, they could have become closer friends. And there was the part of living on the fringes of society that had even been thrilling.

"Yeah, I get it," Alfred said easily. Ivan looked back at him. "Maybe we should meet up tomorrow. Is that good?" He gave him a friendly shoulder-nudge.

"Yes. Definitely." Ivan wanted to stop everything and kiss him right there, but he could wait. It would be better when they were alone. "Would you like if—well, would it be stupid if we met in—"

"In the park?" Alfred laughed.

"—in the park." Ivan covered his smile.

“No. I’d *love* to meet in the park,” Alfred teased. “And text me, okay?”

“Yes. I will. I really like having my phone back,” he said.

“Good,” Alfred gave him one last smile, then pointed over to Kiku Honda. “Someone’s about to get their butt kicked in video games.”

With that, he left, and Ivan felt better about approaching the circle. Even after all this time he still felt like he owed them. His debt was paid, but they had given him a place to stay and rescued him from prison, as well as had listened to and supported him, even if their intentions had been different.

Ivan met Eduard by the comfy chairs. “Thank you for working with me too,” he said. “And for the good computer. Do I get to keep the computer? I like the computer.”

“It is all yours,” Eduard obliged. “Use it for good. I think I am going to use mine to become a software engineer or something *boring* . Who knows. I could always start a blog.”

“If you do, you should follow me,” Ivan recommended. “For quality content.”

Eduard laughed nervously as Ivan winked. “I sure will.”

Ivan searched next for Felicks and Toris, who had sat down at one of the FBI computers and were already using it to design Felicks’s YouTube channel.

“But I am *not* calling my subscribers ‘sisters,’” Felicks spat. “It’s so, like, overkill.”

“Well, anything to be cute and get rich,” Toris put in.

“I am *already* cute and rich, sister.”

Ivan put his hands together politely. “Um, I want to say goodbye…?”

Felicks took the space of an eyeroll to look up. “Oh. Bye, I guess.”

Toris, giving Felicks a shoulder squeeze, had the spirit to stand. “It was nice to meeting you, Ivan. You were a very...admirable hacker. I hope our paths cross again.”

“Thank you. You and Felicks take care of each other,” he said.

“Oh, we totally will!” Felicks assured from the chair.

“You and Alfred also,” Toris responded. “He is a very sociable person, and you have made him more conscious and kind to others. It is easy to see. Be good.”

Waking up that morning, Ivan would’ve never guessed that a strange ex-agent, ex-double agent would appear in his life to make him feel so empowered. “Thank you,” he repeated. His cheeks were starting to hurt from smiling so much.

The final person Ivan had to say goodbye to was found sitting all alone on the floor under the kitchen sink, just watching the rest of the congregation.

“I hope you go very far in life when you grow big,” he told Raivis, bending down and shaking the teenager’s hand sincerely. He remembered how, in the elevator after breaking into this very building, Raivis had told him he had met his friends through writing online. “One day you will write something very important, I know.”

“That is very nice of you,” Raivis told him, redfaced. He sat up straighter, adjusting his ball cap. “It was good to work with you.”

After a second passed between them, Raivis bashfully looked down. “I’m—I’m writing something right now, actually, but I do not think anything will happen to it. The people with all the power are difficult to appeal to.”

Ivan wasn’t sure if he believed that was true. “No matter how small, a big difference can be made.”

Raivis nodded. “Thank you. I hope you, um, garden some very important plants.”

Ivan beamed. “Always.”

His sisters came to him after that. Ivan felt filled with warmth, wrapping an arm around each of them. No more tears.

“Ready to go?” Katya asked softly, running a hand down the scarf he had placed over her shoulders an hour earlier.

“Yes,” he said as Natalya slipped her fingers through his. “I am.”

Chapter End Notes

witness - katy perry

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Sometimes the only way is little-by-little. Sorry this one took so long. The good news: the busy season of my life is kind of over for now? I'll have a lot more time to do things. I was legit going insane y'all. The plan: try to spit out this last upcoming chapter within the next week, and potentially finish the epilogue before the end of December. Can I do it? We'll see.

To all my US followers, happy Thanksgiving! (And may we survive Black Friday.)

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“GO GO GO GO *GO* !” Alfred shouted, yanking the controller as he and Kiku went headfirst against the boss alien in *SKYSCRAPERZ!*

It was almost noon and they had reached the final level, Kiku having stayed the night so they could stay up and get some headway into the game. They had woken up early this morning to ensure they finished it before Alfred had to leave to meet Ivan. Alfred wasn’t exhausted, but he hadn’t remembered making the game so long when he had designed it…

“To the left!” Kiku warned swiftly, and Alfred deftly dodged a pixelated swipe of the bugger’s tentacles. He hadn’t remembered making the boss a humongous space octopus, either.

“I’ll distract it while you go in and— *ah!* ” A hum emitted from the sound system as the boss edged closer. The final star was mere light-years away. It was all or nothing.

“Alfred, it is okay to not be a hero every once and awhile,” Kiku warned as Alfred’s character moved closer to the swinging tentacles. But he was succeeding.

“Oh, just get the star, wise man,” Alfred advised, his health bar plummeting.

And so, smirking, Kiku did.

Within seconds, Alfred was saved from his noble sacrifice by the giant word “VICTORY” flashing across the screen. The octopus crumbled to space dust, sluggishly fading away into the nebulae.

“We won,” Kiku stated as the finale music played. “We actually won.”

Alfred threw his controller into the air. “That’s right, binch. We rule the mother-effing galaxy.”

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Peace. That was the word. Ivan, sitting under a tree right off the edge of the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool, watching all the pedestrians, the obelisk...Ivan was at peace.

They didn’t even have to say anything when Alfred arrived. Ivan sat up, smiled. Alfred sat down, sat his Starbucks down, and smiled. And then they were kissing and it was wonderful.

He let peacefulness overcome him, every other thought in his mind dissolving, his head tilting back, his hands going to Alfred’s hair...his cheeks growing warmer with every long second that passed. He began to feel all bubbly in his stomach, giddiness that fizzed up into his head and made him sigh when it was over. This was good. This was very good. He reminded himself to kiss Alfred as much as possible before…

“So, what did you have to tell me?” Alfred asked, adjusting his glasses, his voice low and soft, though they were no longer paying any more attention to their surroundings.

Ivan sighed again, not wanting to say it. He fell onto his back, lying in the grass. Alfred followed suit.

“Did you hear?” he asked quietly after a second, his voice easily lost on the slight breeze.

Alfred turned to look at him, his face piqued with curiosity. “I haven’t heard anything so far. What?”

Ivan made direct eye contact. “They did surgery on a grape.”

They had to be six inches apart. All within the space of a second Alfred grinned, then tried to hold it back, then poked Ivan in the stomach. “Now *that* is old news.”

Laughing deviously, Ivan kissed him on the tip of his scrunched up nose. Alfred gladly returned the favor, ripping off his glasses. Though they were in the shade, neither of them were shivering any longer. Ivan knew instantly that this moment was the happiest he had ever been, and that meant he couldn’t hold back any longer.

“My sisters and I decided something,” he told Alfred, trying to be as gentle about this as possible. Alfred only gave a little nod and waited patiently, watching him—not analyzing again, just waiting. “Natalya and Katya are already here for too long, so soon they will go back home. And...I will be going with them.”

“Back to Russia?” Alfred asked.

“Yes.” Ivan restrained himself from reaching for his neck, for the place where his scarf would have been. Katya had kept it on so long she had slept in it last night, and he hadn’t had the want to take it from her this morning. “We decided it is best. Their vacation was ruined, see, and I—I need more time to spend with them. To say sorry. To explain. Especially because I do not have a job here anymore. And we think that...to take some time away from DC would also be more…safe.”

If there was frustration or sadness in Alfred’s eyes, Ivan couldn’t detect it. He just took in a heavy breath and exhaled with a quiet, reflective, “Dude.”

“I’m sorry,” Ivan said.

“No—but you’re right. It’s the right thing to do, I mean. I should have seen it coming. I just...if you’re okay with...if it makes you feel...yeah. I get it. I do. Yeah.” Uncertainty melded

with resignation in his voice, and he started blinking rapidly, like he was trying not to look down.

Burning began to creep up Ivan's throat as the reality finally hit him. He inched closer and pressed his lips to Alfred's forehead. "I love you still," he said. "And I am going to keep loving you still. And never stop. We still have time."

"Yeah," Alfred breathed, closing his eyes, his eyebrows pressed together in concentration. "Yeah." He took a slow sip of his coffee.

A gust of wind sent the sunlight scattering through the shadows of the leaves on the ground; ripples traversed the reflecting pool yonder.

"I guess...if we could get by over the Internet with powerful warring secret organizations riding our backs and threatening us the whole way, getting by over the satellites with the world between us should be a piece of cake," Alfred concluded.

"Not a world. Remember Alaska," Ivan teased, glad to smile. "And I do not mean that I will never come back. I do want to come back."

"Or I could come to you," Alfred commented.

"That is right." Ivan slowly sat up, propping himself with his hands. "You have not yet told me what *you* are going to do now that you have no work."

"Oh." A sly smile crept onto Alfred's face, and he too sat up. "Well...nothing yet. I have this one idea, but it's only an idea, and the chances of it actually working out are, like, point-zero-zero-zero-repeating."

Ivan inclined his head. "Please tell me."

“I’m gonna apply to NASA.” A beat. “Again.”

That roused an exclamation out of Ivan, and curiosity twinged through him. “Really? *Again* ?”

Alfred snorted. “Oh, it’s never gonna happen.”

“...What if it does?”

“Then you gotta do the same thing for whatever they have in Russia, and we’ll go to space together.”

“Deal.” Ivan grinned. “Even though SpaceX is closer.”

“Hey.” Alfred stuck a finger at him. “Don’t you talk to me about Elon Musk. That man’s an alien robot and we been known.”

Ivan nodded along. Then he reached forward to kiss Alfred again, just because he could.

“You Russians are almost *too* interesting,” Alfred sang as they parted, but didn’t stop holding each other.

“A politician would say that,” Ivan teased back, realizing they were quoting some of their first conversations back to each other. Sitting in the park on a semi-picnic date… They had really come full circle.

Alfred shifted. “Hey, it’s lunch. Are you hungry? Where’s Yao Wang when we need him?” He glanced around, but the tree-lined curb was devoid of food trucks.

“Always thinking of food,” Ivan commented, but then bit his lip. “So you didn’t hear?”

Alfred paused, and the hands that were holding Ivan’s squeezed them. “What? Is this again about the—Ivan, I do try my best not to be a local.”

Laughter escaped Ivan as he confirmed, “No, no, about Yao! Because of all his bribe money, he got very rich very fast overnight. He closed down his *Wok & Roll* business and used it to start up a fancy gourmet restaurant on the nice side of the city.”

Alfred’s mouth hung open. “You’re kidding. *Overnight* ? Does the man not quit?”

Ivan had to agree. “It is...the right word in English is ‘formidable,’ I think.”

“Well, how’s about that.” Alfred shuddered. “You know, I’m proud of him. For actually managing to *profit* from all of that and come out on top.”

“He probably deserves it,” Ivan admitted, stretching languidly. “We should eat there sometime, though it is a loss for him to not travel around.”

“I’ll tell you what’s a *loss* , all right,” Alfred snickered.

Ivan smiled at him. He didn’t know how he had survived without Alfred. There was next to nothing in his life brighter or happier. He lightly touched Alfred’s tan skin, wanting to memorize the feel before they had to part.

“I like how you talk and laugh so loud, but inside you are so soft,” he said, and both of them quieted. “And I am going to miss how you always smell much too strong of deodorant.”

“It’s the teen spirit,” Alfred informed. “...And—aw, thank you.”

“Thank you for what?” Ivan pondered. “Thank you, next?”

“Thank you for...liking...me?” Alfred went cherry-red. “I like—I *love* when you can be both assertive and gentle, and you’re super good at thinking things through. You’re great at staying stable, but even when—well, I’ll be honest—when you get all fired up and passionate and everything it kinda turns me on.”

Warmth bloomed in Ivan’s chest and he edged closer. “You think that me trying to be a better hacker than you is...hot?”

Alfred’s blushing face faltered. “I mean—I mean there’s no question that I’m the better hacker out of us…”

Ivan tilted his head. “Oh? No, I am sorry, but you are very wrong in that statement. Your hacking is good, but mine is great. That is the facts.”

Alfred stared at him and inhaled slowly. His voice dropped an octave. “Oh, yeah. It’s hot.”

Ivan swatted at him, but Alfred rolled away and burst into his beautiful loud laughter, getting grass in his hair and nearly smashing his glasses. Ivan snatched up his Starbucks and took a sip of it out of a pleased sort of spite. A pedestrian looked over from the Reflecting Pool; while Alfred caught his breath, Ivan gave them a friendly wave. “Ignore my silly boyfriend,” he wanted to call. He was surprised when the onlooker smiled and waved back. Full circle indeed.

“You Americans are, as they say, ‘something else,’” Ivan noted. “Are you hurt from that ground, or did you just disperse your energy?”

He felt bubbles again as Alfred’s eyes re-met his. “Oh, oh, shoot! That reminds me! You’ll never guess what’s gonna be going through Congress soon.”

Ivan was mildly confused, but humored him. “What?”

“A bill.” Alfred grinned. “A bill over environmental protection, drafted by SAVE THE WHALES.”

Ivan set down the Starbucks and near gasped. *Raivis!* “The whale people finally did it! That is so good! Ah, I am so proud! Does this mean they will stop stopping traffic?”

“Probably not. Congress takes *forever* , and when the roads are clear Washington has no one to be mad at so nothing ever gets done, but hey. I’m happy, too. I hope their... *extraneous activities* are overlooked.”

Ivan covered his giggle. “I bet there are too many secrets to keep track of already.”

“Tell me about it,” Alfred sighed, putting his hands behind his head.

“Truth is not real, but it does feel good,” Ivan pondered, partly to himself. Relaxed, he nestled up against Alfred and closed his eyes. They stayed that way for a long moment, birds fluttering above them, the first leaves of autumn in their hair. Ivan loved Alfred when he was loud and funny and obnoxious, but there were wonderful emotions about him when they were silent and comfortable. He could imagine the worries drifting away, the sadness subsiding. He felt so at peace that he began to fall asleep, the city sounds a dull lull in the back of his head. He sure as well might miss Washington, D.C.

It was impossible to tell how much time had passed before he was coming back around. He registered Alfred playing with his hair, saying something, and turned over to listen.

“They should make a movie out of us, don’t you think? ‘The Russian spy and the FBI agent fall in love.’ A thriller drama. I’d watch it.”

Ivan couldn’t help but kiss him again. Alfred smiled against his lips, soft and easy. “I would illegally download it,” he said.

“Mm. Sexy.”

“Wow,” Ivan retorted. “ *Spasibo* . What are you doing tonight?”

Alfred’s starry eyes went very wide for a fraction of a second, and then settled. “Uh. I gotta clean my apartment and return all my old work junk so they can destroy it.
How...about...you?”

“Same. But if you have time you should come over for dinner. I want you to meet my sisters for real before we leave.”

“Oh, golly.” Alfred scratched his head. “Should I be scared? I’m scared.”

Ivan lightly poked him in the stomach. “I will ask Katya to make her borscht. Remember? The cold soup? Another very good bribe. And I will tell Natalya no hitting.”

“Then I accept.”

“Good.”

The world was a big place, full of many things, good and bad. In life, chaos was constant, and nothing ever turned out the way one predicted it. Ivan knew this. He had learned time and time again that the road to home was twisted, bumpy, and dangerous—there were hidden valleys and noisy cities—and sometimes, when he reached the end, he found that home had moved. The world terrified him and made him laugh. It loved him and tortured him. He had been mixed up so many times, discarded and stirred into the mess, that it was hard to see where his coordinates connected, but this feeling right here—right now—was one of harmony.

Things would change, he knew. The world would be chaotic time and time again. He had to remember this now as it was, or at least remember how happy it made him feel.

“Hey,” Alfred said, his voice a whisper on the breeze. “I can follow you online now. How’s your account doing?”

Ivan hadn’t thought about his account in a while. He had all but abandoned it. “Do you mean the knitting one or the meme one?”

Alfred nudged his shoulder. “You know which one I mean!”

Ivan dug into his pocket for his phone. As he opened up the page, he watched Alfred watch him in the reflection. This was how they had met. It was absolutely insane. What was more insane, however, was what waited for Ivan when he checked his follower count.

“I can’t believe it!” he gasped. “It was low! I had stopped posting for a long time and I lost a lot of followers! But now, I…”

“How the heck did that happen?” Alfred wondered, seeing the number for himself.

Ivan clutched the phone to his chest and laughed out of disbelief. “One million again!”

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As Alfred hoisted himself up into the Ford, he saluted his brother. Matt caught his wink in the mirror and smiled. “Your second date went well, I presume?”

“Yeehaw,” Alfred answered. “Things are good, my man. Things are very, very good.”

The engine roared as they drove off down the street. “I’m glad to hear.”

Chapter End Notes

truth - gwen stefani

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

the gray division

“Just because I let you be in charge of tomatoes does not mean you can *take* them, idiot,” Lovino scolded, ripping the box out of Antonio’s hands. “One day unemployed and you already result to stealing food! Shame on fucking you!”

“I promise I am not going to take them,” Antonio grinned. “I was just admiring them. They are very red.”

Lovino shifted his load of produce to put a hand on his hip. “Yeah, well, why don’t you *admire* something else.”

Antonio didn’t move a muscle and just stared. “Okay.”

Lovino issued a frazzled snort and turned, throwing a glare over his shoulder, walking away quickly to presumably finish closing up shop.

“Ooh, now *you* are very red, too!”

“I swear to God I will put you right back in that cellar.”

As if the words had summoned him, Feliciano popped up from the corner market’s basement, piles of extra boxes in his arms. He huffed as he dropped them onto the counter, wiping at his hands. “Woo! Thank you for much for helping me close today, you guys!”

Antonio smiled at Feliciano, but Lovino scowled. “Do not thank them; they are useless!” Lovino predicted Antonio to protest, so he cut him off beforehand. “I don’t mean you. I am talking about your fuck ass *friends* .” He gestured to Francis and Gilbert, who were sitting out on the curb outside like vagrants.

Francis seemed to mishear. He turned around and blew a lazy kiss.

Lovino seethed, but told himself it wasn’t worth a response. He had dealt enough with these people that letting himself get annoyed wasn’t worth it anymore. He managed a sigh and turned back to his baby brother. “You still have that envelope with the money I gave you? I want to get a real security system for this place.”

Feliciano began to nod. “Um, but I thought we were going to use it to…” He trailed off, his eyes locking on something down the street.

“That better not be who I think it is,” Lovino mumbled, but looked as well.

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Signore Feliciano Vargas’s life had changed.

He saw it as he watched Elizabeta and Ludwig approach from down the street, the slowly sinking afternoon sun backing them. All he could think about was his impending freedom, and with his brother and Ludwig now able to be in the picture, freedom was beginning to take a shape. He didn’t care about living a new, debt-absolved life, but rather he just cared about living with the people he cared about. That was freedom enough for him.

“This is crazy!” he laughed to himself. None heard him but his brother, who rolled his eyes and continued sorting the produce away, Antonio trailing him like a dog. Feliciano fell

against one of the market's wooden columns and watched Ludwig approach his own brother on the curb. While Elizabeta looked on, Gilbert jumped up and patted Ludwig on the back, exchanging words and questions with him in German. Feliciano felt his chest inflate with happiness seeing the Beilschmidts senza handcuffs. Now Ludwig didn't have to be so stressed and sad all the time, and he had his family back, and he could be happy…

"Lovino? What would you do if I was locked up and taken away from you?" Feliciano breathed.

"Celebrate," Lovino answered without looking up.

Feliciano grinned and danced back to him. "You don't mean that!" Lovino began to go red again. "You would have no one to yell at, and you would be sad and lonely. I would cry every day if it were you! Ludwig didn't cry every day, though, because he's strong. Or at least he didn't do it in front of me, but I do think with me he became a little more...sensitive."

"Good for you," Lovino sighed. "Now, are you gonna help me close or what? We gotta go home and get these ex-agents off our backs!" A snide look at Antonio, who only laughed.

But Feliciano wasn't listening. He hadn't even noticed himself step off the porch, until he was on the concrete and Ludwig and Gilbert were two meters from him. The brothers' conversation slowly came to a halt as Gilbert took in Feliciano, grinned, and gave Ludwig a slap on the shoulder. He muttered something Feliciano didn't quite catch and then sauntered off to stand by Elizabeta. Ludwig and Feliciano were left staring at each other.

"Um," Ludwig began, the tips of his ears already pink. Feliciano's glee swelled.

"Let's take a walk," he decided, clasping his hand in Ludwig's and lightly tugging him away. Ludwig did not hesitate to follow. Francis whistled after them while Lovino scoffed at their backs, but neither Feliciano nor Ludwig paid any mind. Ludwig waited until they were a block away to speak.

He cleared his throat professionally. "I want to ask you something."

“Okay,” said Feliciano, content. The sunset had just started to dip below the skyline of the taller buildings to the west. It reminded him of two days ago when… Had that only been two days ago? He cleared his mind of thoughts related to the kidnappings and the circle. This was the now.

Ludwig paused to examine him, but instead of the familiar suspicion Feliciano was used to seeing, he actually looked a bit sheepish. Feliciano smiled wide, unaware Ludwig could ever wear such a face. Ludwig cleared his throat again.

His voice was much softened by the time he got out, “I want to ask if you...if you would like…”

“If I would like…” Feliciano prompted, his heartbeat beginning to pick up speed.

Ludwig closed his eyes. “If you would like. To go on a date.”

Feliciano almost couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He laughed out loud. “With you? Sincerely?”

Ludwig nodded.

“Not just a fake business dinner, but where we can still look all nice? And you can hold my hand this time, *finalmente* ? And eat fancy food again?”

Ludwig nodded a bit more aggressively.

“Then of course!” he exclaimed. “I was wondering how long you would wait to ask! I was just about to do it myself!”

His heart pounded as Ludwig looked down bashfully, cheeks all rosy. He was perfect. Ludwig began to mumble something, then stopped, then laughed to himself and seemed to catch his breath. His electric blue eyes slowly, carefully met Feliciano's.

And Feliciano couldn't help but kiss him right there. He stood tall and cupped Ludwig's cheek in his hand, releasing a satisfied hum as their lips met. Ludwig eased up to wrap him in a gentle hug, much less intensive and heat-of-the-moment than their first kiss, and all the more amazing. Feliciano leaned and fell into it, relishing the feeling of them together like this, the feeling of being full and complete, the feeling that he had been striving for for so long. He knew he wanted more of this. Oh, *yes* , he wanted more of this.

Brushing his hands over Ludwig's shirt collar, he declared, "I'm really sorry for pulling a knife on you the first time. You're as sweet as chocolate!"

Ludwig rolled his eyes, but didn't let go of him. "And you're an absolutely terrible, shameless flirt, Feliciano. But—I am glad to have you."

"Me too." He spun them around in a silly little circle on the sidewalk, grinning. "And I am glad that we made it through."

"Yes," Ludwig agreed, his face all lit up. "Very much."

"You are so beautiful when you smile and laugh," Feliciano sang softly, tracing the curve of his lips. His heart was throbbing and he was sure Ludwig could feel it. "You make me want to stay for forever."

Ludwig pressed a kiss to his forehead, and then stilled. "Stay...what do you mean? I thought you were not going back because of the…" He trailed off, waiting. Feliciano didn't elaborate —only allowed his own smile to grow into a simper. Ludwig raised his eyebrows. "You're doing it again."

"What?" Feliciano merely asked.

“Oh, you do not have to pretend to be innocent anymore,” he huffed. “Frankly, you are too smart for your own good. You made a very good spy, but I think that you could do anything if —” He cut himself off. “You’re just so...special. You are the most special person I have ever met.”

“Oh.” He fell silent. Warmth blossomed between them and his heart ached. Feliciano had been called many things in his life, but when Ludwig said it, he believed it. His heart didn’t want to ever leave this.

And he was free now, he reminded himself.

“You make me the most happy I have ever been,” he told Ludwig, embracing him tightly, then loosening away. The sunset baked him golden. He winked. “And I am sorry for teasing you so much.”

Lovino waltzed quickly down the street, waving the money-filled envelope. “ *Andiamo, fratellino* ,” he warned. When he turned and saw Antonio, Gilbert, and Francis following him, he burst into a dead sprint, fading right into the busy, chaotic, mysterious city surrounding them.

And Ludwig—bless him—tried to hold onto Feliciano’s hand, but Feliciano slipped right through his fingers. “Stay,” Ludwig urged.

“Oh, I will stay,” Feliciano promised, stepping backwards, “but only if you can catch me, one last time.” He let go of Ludwig, threw another wink over his shoulder, and took off running.

Ludwig did not hesitate to follow.

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Elizabeta Héderváry observed it all.

She did not run after them, nor did she even flinch when they were gone. She always had been a good observer, and, yes, these agents and spies and hackers had captivated her. This whole underground world of lies and truths and veiled love was like nothing she had ever experienced.

She stood there, in the middle of Washington, D.C., alone, for a very long time. She watched the yellow sun caress the horizon, the clouds change from orange to pink to purple. She brushed her hair over her shoulders and allowed her awe to consume her for a few blissful moments.

She had imagined it would end this way.

And yet—would it end? Did anything ever, truly, end? She wondered this as she finally turned and began to walk back into reality, dreamlike breezes passing over her. Stuff changed, yes—but nothing in the universe ever ended. There were always successions, other things happening on the other side. Perpetual motion.

Pondering this, Elizabeta almost missed the insistent buzzing emanating from her phone. She pulled it out of her pantsuit pocket and examined it curiously.

She had imagined it would continue for forever.

Glancing up and around her, she answered the call and stepped back into the world.

Chapter End Notes

oops!...i did it again - britney spears

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You guys already know. Holy wow. Just wow.

I want to say thanks to everyone for reading this story, whether you commented or not, whether you finished or not, whether you even started. I'll tell you that I had never imagined this would become a huge part of my 2018, but because of y'all it was a possibility. I'm proud of all of you, and for myself for managing to finish all near 90,000 words of it. Even though some parts may not have been the best they could have been, and my life constantly got in the way, I still feel like this experience was a success and I know I'll always be glad for it.

Dear god it's gonna be weird without this.

And I'll be honest—I don't know what comes next. Whether or not I have the wherewithal to keep writing and creating for this base, whether or not I'll be able to stick around. But I love you guys and I'm so thankful we met and I'll never regret making this weird little story. It helped me through a lot of tough shit. The inspiration from this came from my friends and an early morning art class and the Internet, of course, and I'm always thankful for that, too. I'm never done.

So happy holidays to everyone, and may you be safe and well at the end of this year and into the next! Please tell me your final thoughts if you want, as well, because that's always an added bonus. I hope this thing made you as happy as it did for me.

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End Notes

I have nothing to say for myself.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!